# Christianity and Islam

## The Mutual Understanding and the Development of their Early Relations till the End of the Umayyad Islamic Rule in the Middle East, with Special Focus on the Identity Formation of Both Communities

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# Abstract

In this thesis I will explore how the religious identities of Christian churches and Muslim communities were formed in the socio-political and cultural context of the Middle East during the early period of Islamic rule. This formation was the product of a long process grounded in struggles over power and primacy, the hindrances of language, and limits in communication among Christians. Islam was born into a socio-political and cultural context heavily influenced by the Melkite, Monophysite and Nestorian churches, which, caught in their own processes of identity formation, had flourished in Arabia for 2 centuries at least, though Judaism was also a religious context that affected the formation of Islamic identity in Arabia. The development of the identity of both Christian and Muslim communities was a result of direct interaction between them after Islam expanded into the previously Christian region to the north of Arabia. This thesis explores this process and argues for an evident influence of main orthodox Christianity, but also non-orthodox Jewish-Christianity (Ebionite), on Islam using modern Muslim scholarship that has started to accept this, as well as Arab Christian scholarship not yet familiar in the West.

# Contents

# Introduction

As a Christian living in the Middle East, I always face questions about my faith, my religious practices, worship and ethics. These questions come usually from my Muslim friends, school-mates, neighbors and even foreigners. They raised in my mind, since early adolescent life, a passion and motivation to study my Bible more, and to study Islam as a religion. I started observing Muslim practices and listening to their teachings, while at the same time trying to find appropriate answers to their questions. This process led me to discover myself and my faith more deeply, and at the same time I was able to understand how my fellow citizens think of me and of themselves.

The questions Muslims were asking were weird sometimes and had nothing to do with my faith. Some had a form of accusation such as 'Christians worship three gods, father, mother (Mary) and son.'

It was good to know how they were thinking, but I was more interested to know how Muslims came up with these questions/accusations. How and when did they develop their concepts of Christianity? What was the context of this development? Was there any Christian response or explanation? Muslims seemed to understand Christian faith from their own resources without listening to Christian explanation of Christian faith.

This led me to write this thesis in order to explore deeply the Christian and Muslim religious identities in the Arab context that were developed in the early centuries of their relations. What were the Christian reactions and responses to the challenge of Islam? How was Christian identity formed before the coming of Islam? Was there any Christian (or Jewish) influence on Islam from the beginning and did it continue after the spread of Muslims in the Middle East? Was Islam a product of a hidden struggle between orthodox and non-orthodox Christianities?

## Identity and influence

Questions of identity and its definition had existed for Christians before the coming of Islam to the region, which included Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Egypt. For seven centuries, they were divided into three different "orthodoxies" namely the Nestorian, Monophysite and Chalcedonian churches. Several socio-political, cultural, linguistic and dogmatic factors played a role in these divisions that led the followers, as much as the leaders, of these churches to seek to form their own distinct identity along dogmatic, as well as organizational lines. The three main factors were: language; the different historical and socio-cultural background (context) of the churches; and the two different ecclesiastical systems that governed them, namely collegial hierarchy in the Eastern churches and papal hierarchy in the West. Under Muslim rule starting mid seventh century AD, the Christian struggle for identity continued.

Meanwhile Muslims themselves were looking to form and establish their own identity, especially as they invaded and began to rule new lands and peoples. Social, religious and cultural interaction with Christian (and Jewish) peoples in Arabia and then the new lands north of Arabia helped Muhammad and his followers to develop their own religious thought, especially the presence of Christianity in the form of Ebionite/ Jewish-Christianity. Islam was born in an Arab context for Arabs, with religious identity that could not absorb the complicated Greek philosophy, but Muhammad understood himself to be a prophet continuing the preaching and message of the former Biblical prophets including Abraham, Moses and Jesus and so Jewish and Christian resources were important. Muhammad wanted to prove his prophecy relying on the previous revelations.

As Islam became established in a more sophisticated way, it developed its own identity in relation to Christianity, which considered Ebionitism a heresy. As a result, Islam understood Christianity in the new subjected lands as a religion counter to its dogmas. Muslims then started to see Islam as a universal religion (not only for Arabs), which was a leap in understanding their religious identity.

Traditionally, Muslim scholars rejected all kinds of Christian or Jewish influences on Islam and its founding book, the Qur'an. Muslims believe that Islam was directly revealed to Muhammad over 23 years of his prophetic life.

Modern Muslim scholars, however, shifted from that traditional view to accept that Islam was influenced by a certain Christian group present in Arabia at the time of Muhammad. This group was a Jewish-Christian group (Ebionite) that is considered by Muslims as having the true Christian belief, while Christians consider it heretical. Muslims consider Islam to be a continuation of the true Christianity, and Orthodox Christianity for them was distorted at a certain time in history.

In light of these modern developments and the acceptance of a different 'Christianity' in Arabia, the question about the Christian impact on Islam and the type of Christianity that Islam engaged within its text takes on new importance. Again, the aim in exploring this issue is not polemical. My aim is not to underestimate or eliminate the Islamic concept of revelation, but to find a way to establish mutual understanding among both communities. On historical grounds, ignoring the Christian influence on the Qur'an is not possible any more in the light of the new developments in Muslim thinking. Even some conservative Muslim scholars do not deny the Christian impact on Islam, but they are still careful about admitting it. This will be discussed in detail later on.

## Structuring the thesis

This thesis explores these developments with three main chapters focusing on the issue of identity formation of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East.

Chapter One presents and discusses the history of Christian churches in the region in the first seven centuries of the Common Era: their formation, struggles, and socio-political and cultural contexts, as well as their search for identity through dogmatic discussions. How the Christological debate and schism shaped Christian history, reality and identity before the coming of Islam to the region is also examined.

Chapter Two explores how Christian struggles, including the heretical movements, influenced Arabs before Islam, and how this influence found its way to Islamic teachings. This was clear in the way Islam revealed in the Qur'an saw Christianity and its belief in Christ. The chapter shows how the identity of Muhammad as prophet and the Qur'an itself were born in a Judeo-Christian environment, which affected how Islam understood the major Christian doctrines.

Chapter Three deals with Islamic expansion[1] into the Christian regions in Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia. It explores the reasons behind this expansion, the way Muslims treated Christians, and the ways Christians interpreted this expansion. The assessment of the resources about this movement is a major factor in this chapter. It also deals with the first Muslim rule in the heart of Syria. The interaction between the two communities helped them to form their own identity and develop it in a new socio-political and theological context for both.

[1] Muslim sources call them conquests or Futuh فتوح in Arabic.

# Chapter One: Eastern Christianity on the Eve of Islam: A Historical and Theological Overview.

This chapter is concerned with the situation of Eastern Christianity from the beginning till the first quarter of the seventh century. It will highlight the main historical events, especially after Constantine, Roman Emperor, adopted Christianity and issued what is called the Milan Declaration in AD 313. Then Christian theological controversies – especially the Christological controversies – started to shape history in the Christian world in general, but in the Middle East (henceforth ME) in particular.

The main objective of this chapter is to show the struggles and inner affairs of the Christian Church(es) before the rise and development of the Arab people as a Muslim nation. Arabs were driven by the new religion, Islam, which was born in Arabia around the beginning of the seventh century and led to the conquest of the Christian lands. The results of these struggles and affairs would influence the nature of Christianity's interaction with Islam and the identity formation of both.

What was the main struggle(s) among the Christians in these lands? What was the relationship between the church and the 'Christian' Byzantine Empire on the one hand, and the Persian Sassanid Empire on the other hand? Did the political struggles and wars between those two empires contribute to the Churches choice of their distinctive 'Orthodoxy'? What role did the Church Councils play to unite or divide the church? Was the struggle in these councils only theological? What were the factors which led the churches to form and develop their distinctive identity in the fifth and sixth centuries?

To answer these sorts of questions, this chapter will present different views of the three types of 'Orthodoxy' as reflected in the primary resources produced by bishops or writers belonging to each of these three churches. Nobody can better reflect the point of view of these Churches than those who lived the struggle themselves or were affected by it throughout the next centuries of that struggle. Fortunately, history reserved to us some of these sources that have been translated into different modern languages. In addition, there

is a lot of secondary material written by people belonging to these churches and by other scholars commenting on this period of time.[2]

The chapter will be divided into four main sections.

The first will briefly note the Christian presence in the lands that were mainly populated by Christians, describing the particular factors that contributed to the rise of Christianity in these lands.

The second will present the main controversies within the context of the Christian 'Ecumenical' councils held to discuss the different issues that arose after Christianity became the "State Religion" of the Byzantine Empire in the beginning of the fourth century until the coming of Islam in the seventh century.

The third section will discuss the formation of three distinct theologies that evolved eventually to establish three separate Churches: the *Nestorian*, the *Monophysite* and the *Melkite* Churches. It is important to mention that most modern scholarship uses different terminologies to describe these three Churches: *Diophysite* for Nestorians, *Miaphysites* for the two Monophysite Churches in Syria and Egypt, and *Chalcedonian* for the Melkites. Scholars argue that their new terms reflect the theology of the church whereas the old designations were used in times of struggle as accusations by one party against the other.[3] I will mainly use the traditional titles of the Nestorian Church in the East/Mesopotamia; the Jacobite (Monophysite) Church of Syria including Antioch; the Coptic (Monophysite) Church in Egypt; and the Melkite Chalcedonian Church in Palestine and other parts of the ME. These traditional titles were used for several decades and they were also used later on

[2] This chapter will not use the Muslim Chronicles and Historical writings. The early Muslim writers showed no knowledge of the main churches and/or the differences between them. Only the Muslim writers from the AH 4th/AD 10th (i.e *al-Mas`udi, al-Tabari, al-Biruni(i.e., p. 282) and Ibn al-Jawzi*) onward have showed good knowledge of the three main Churches with details on the historical and theological controversies led to the rise of these churches.

[3] Gerrit J. Reinink. "Tradition and Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in the sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq*"* in *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1-3 (2009), 217-218; Lucas van Rompay, "The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia" in The *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 381.

by Muslim historians. Retaining these terms will help in understanding how Muslim-Christian theological dialogue and relations developed in later centuries. The new theological designations will be used whenever they are needed within the relevant context.

The fourth section will analyze how the three distinctive theologies were formed in their "final" shape, just before the coming of Islam. It will analyze the factors in this formation within the political, social, and theological context.

## Early Christianity in Mesopotamia

It is not so clear how Christianity arrived in Mesopotamia in the early decades of the beginning of the Christian missionary work to the east. The records we have tend to be more legendary than historical in nature. They try to establish an apostolic foundation for the Patriarchal See of the East. Moreover, they show that the first 'Christian State' with its first 'Christian King' was established in Edessa (the capital city of Osrhoene Kingdom), which became eventually the "First Christian Kingdom" long before the Roman empire became a "Christian Empire".

One of the chroniclers who has established this trend of thought is Mari bin Suleiman, a historian probably from the sixth century. He recorded the lives of 130 patriarchs of the Church of the East in Edessa (*al-Ruha* in Arabic) starting with Addai (Aggai). According to tradition, Addai was one of the seventy disciples who were sent by Jesus (Luke 10:1-12 and 17-20) to preach the Gospel. He was sent to Edessa by Thomas the apostle as a response to Abgar V's (the Black) plea to Jesus to come and heal him after he heard about Jesus' miraculous works in Palestine. Jesus answered that He would send one of his disciples to heal Abgar after Jesus' crucifixion. As a consequence, Addai came to Edessa, healed the king and established churches. Eventually Edessa became a Christian Kingdom before it fell into the hands of the Persian Parthian Dynasty, at which time persecution of the Christians began.[4] The Chronicle shows how Christian missionaries led by Addai were

[4] Henricus Gismondi (ed.). *Maris Amri Et Slibae: De Patriarchis Nestorianorum,Commentaria*. (Arabic). (Rome: Excudebat C. De. Luigi, 1899), 1-2.

launched in Nisibis, al-Mosel, and in all Mesopotamia and Babylon. It is noted also that the four Patriarchs who followed were all sent from Jerusalem to lead the church in Edessa, and all of them were of Jewish descent with a blood relation to Joseph, Mary's fiancé.[5] This tradition gives us a clear indication of what type of Christianity was established in the area, without neglecting the fact that this area historically was inhabited by Jews or people adopting Jewish faith since the Babylonian exile.[6] Mar Bawai Soro, an Assyrian Bishop, reflects on his own history by saying:

> From early Christian times, there have been two prevalent legends that have described the founding of Mesopotamian Christianity: 1) the account of Addai the Disciple of Edessa, and, 2) the account of Thomas the Apostle of India…Though the Thomas tradition may well be plausible and is accepted by many, historians have tended to dismiss both of these traditions as legends of late composition (around 4th cent.) designed to establish the apostolicity of Syriac Christianity.[7]

Although the early history of the establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the surrounding areas has its legendary stories, there is more accurate information produced in the second half of the second century that gives a clear and historical indication of the active presence of Christianity among the East Syriac people in Mesopotamia. The Syriac version of the Old Testament accomplished by Jewish scholars who converted to Christianity used "*a form of language close to the new literary language of Edessene Christians".*[8] This is evidence of these early Christian-Jewish relations that were reflected in the earlier traditions about Christianity in Edessa. Moreover, the second century witnessed the birth of the Syriac translation of the Gospels. There is, however, a debate about which was translated first into Syriac: the one harmonized Gospel known as *Diatessaron* or the four separate Gospels.[9]

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[5] Ibid., 3-6.
[6] Suha Rassam. *Christianity in Iraq* (Victoria, Australia: Gracewing, 2010), 12-13.
[7] Mar Bawai Soro, "The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage (5th to 8th Century): Churches of the Syriac Tradition: The Assyrians (East Syriacs)" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. ed. Habib Badr, Suad Abou el Rouss Slim and Joseph Abou Nohra. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005) 256.
[8] Lucas van Rompay, "The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 367.
8 Ibid., 368.

There is also good historical knowledge of people who lived in the second and third centuries who contributed to the life and ministry of the church in Mesopotamia. The three celebrated figures were a king and two theologians.

The king was Abgar VIII (the Great) who was the king of Edessa for 35 years (AD177-212) and adopted Christianity officially around the year AD 200. Evidence shows that the Christian Church progressed well under his rule. Although Edessa was an independent kingdom at that time, keeping good relations with Rome, King Abgar is reported as pro-Persian at heart. [10]

The first theologian was Bardaisan (154-222) who was born in Edessa from a Persian noble family. He converted to Christianity when he was 25 years old. As Abgar's friend, he seems to have influenced the King's conversion. He was a philosopher and theologian deeply rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition, though he wrote in Syriac. He fought against the heresy of Marcion, but there is doubt about his own theology: was it influenced by a type of Gnosticism?[11] It seems that "later generations of Syriac Christians explicitly rejected Bardaisan`s heritage, and Ephraim (the Syrian) condemned and cursed him as one of the arch-heretics".[12]

The second theologian was Tatian (c.110-180) who was from noble descent. He was born in Adiabene.[13] After his conversion he went to Rome to be the disciple of Justin Martyr. In 172 he came back to Adiabene where he most probably opened a school to teach theology and philosophy. His major work was the *Diatessaron*, which is the harmony of the four canonical gospels, using Matthew as its base, and including some non-canonical material.[14]

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[10] Samuel H. Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500*. (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 57-58.
[11] For more details about his life, ministry, possible heretical views and writings see Samuel H. Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 64-69, and Suha Rassam. *Christianity in Iraq*, 27.
[12] Lucas van Rompay, The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 370.
[13] It is located in the North East of Mesopotamia, Arbela as its capital city.
[14] S.Rassam. *Christianity in Iraq,* 26-27; Rompay. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 368; For detailed account of *Tatian* and his works see Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia,* 72-77.

In the year 224 or 226 the Sassanid Persian family captured the rule in Persia. They adopted Zoroastrianism as the religion of the state in 286. Although the Sassanid rulers did not impose their religion on the population of Mesopotamia and Persia in general and did not forbid preaching Christianity among the pagans, they did not allow the conversions of Zoroastrians to Christianity, especially among the high ranks of society. The punishment for conversion was death.

The relative openness of the Parthian Persian dynasty toward Christianity was thus replaced with a rule hostile to Christians. This rule lasted for four centuries and had bloody wars with the neighboring Byzantine Empire till the coming of Islam. The big losers in this struggle were the Christians who lived in the Persian territories, especially after the conversion of Constantine, firstly, because the Christian-populated territories in Mesopotamia, such as Edessa and Nisibis, were strategic buffer zones for both empires. Secondly, the Sassanid rulers looked on the Christians as suspect citizens who shared the religion of the enemy. The most hostile period of the Persian persecution was under Shapur II (R. 309-379). When the negotiations between Shapur II and Constantine (the new Christian Emperor) failed, Constantine asked Shapur to protect the Christians within his territories, which made Shapur suspicious of the Persian Christians' loyalty to his rule.[15] The news of this persecution is also reported in the Greek *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*[16]. It seems that the struggle was not only political but also religious: Christianity was spreading among the Arabs and the Persians through its monastic and theological schools in all Persian territories. The Zoroastrian priests were not happy and so they used their influence to encourage the emperors and society to persecute the Christians.[17]

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[15] For details see Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*,29-32; Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*,136-145; also Pat. Mgr. Addai Scher, *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Seert) Première Partie(I)*. (Paris : Brepols, 1993), 293-4; Pat. Mgr. Addai Scher, *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Seert), Première Partie(II)* (Paris : Firmin-Didot Et Cie, Imprimeurs-Editeurs, 1950), 222-223. These books are in Arabic and French. I am using the Arabic text.

[16] Cyril Mango & Roger Scott (eds), *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History Ad 284-813* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 41.

[17] S. P. Brock "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties" in *Religion and National Identity: Papers Read at the Nineteenth Summer Meeting and the Twentieth Winter Meeting of the*

This brief presentation of the origins of Christianity in Mesopotamia within its social, religious and political context will help us understand how and why the Christians in Mesopotamia developed their own trend of Orthodoxy later on.

## Early Christianity in Egypt

The early Christian presence in Egypt is built upon the Biblical tradition that Matt 2:13-20 mentions Egypt as the refuge land for the Holy Family. Extra-biblical and late texts have built on this a lot of stories about Jesus, the miraculous baby who performed wonders in the Land of Egypt as an infant. These texts described Jesus talking to his mother while still a baby nursing from Mary's breast feeding and miraculously stopping a huge stone on which his hand left a mark. They also give some details about the different places the family used to hide in Upper Egypt.

Such verbal traditions and stories are recorded and documented in a post-Chalcedonian homily by the Coptic Patriarch Timothy II Aelurus (457–477), the successor of Dioscorus I (444–454), who saw the Mother of God, Mary (the Theotokos), in a vision on his way to Upper Egypt to consecrate a new church named after the founder of coenobitic monasteries, Pachomius. Mary tells the Patriarch all that had happened to them as family in Egypt.[18] This vision was proved to be genuine to the Patriarch because his deacon could tell the patriarch all that he saw; the vision was revealed to the deacon at the same time.[19] Although the whole vision intended to defend the originality and apostolic rights of the Coptic Patriarch over Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, we can see how the Copts understand their roots as Christians in relation to the Holy Family's visit to Egypt immediately after Jesus` birth.

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*Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. by Stuart Mews (Oxford: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by B. Blackwell, 1982), 6-8; Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 105-112.

[18] Timothy Aelurus. *L'homélie sur l'église du Rocher / attribuée à Timothée Ælure*, Trans. & Ed. Anne Bouvarel-Boud'hors, Ramez.Boutros and Colin, Gérard. In *Patrologia Orientalis*, Tome 49, fasc.1, N° 217 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2001), 112-130.

[19] Ibid., 140.

The other tradition about the apostolicity of Coptic Christianity is the tradition of St. Mark. The Pope of the Coptic Church is still called the Patriarch of the See of St. Mark. Coptic historians describe the Origins of Coptic Christianity in such words as:

> The Copts pride themselves on the apostolicity of their national Church, whose founder was none other than St Mark, one of the four Evangelists and the author of the oldest canonical Gospel…John Mark is regarded by the Coptic hierarchy as the first in their unbroken chain of 116 (now 118) patriarchs.[20]

Eusebius was probably the first to provide a full account of the list of the Coptic patriarchs starting with Mark who is believed to have arrived in Alexandria around the year 43. After going back to Rome he eventually returned to Egypt to be martyred in the early 60s at the hands of the pagan worshippers in Alexandria. Other earlier sources do not give a lot of information.[21]

The full account of St. Mark and all the succeeding patriarchs up to AD 950s is recorded by a Coptic bishop who lived and wrote by the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh centuries (other writers have continued his work through the next few centuries). Bishop Severus (Sawirus) ibn al-Moqaffa` wrote the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* in Arabic. In this work Severus gives a full record of the Christian history of Egypt from the Coptic Monophysite point of view showing the Orthodoxy of the Patriarchs and their ministry to spread Orthodox teachings, their role in the Councils, and all their sufferings throughout the history he is covering. The work has been translated and published several times.[22]

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[20] Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1968), 25.

[21] Janet Timbie. "Coptic Christianity" in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. ed. by Ken Parry. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 96.

[22] I managed to get 3 versions of the work: B.T. Evetts (ed.). "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria" in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 2 vols. in 4 Fasc. (Paris: Firmin-Didot ET Cie, Imprimeurs-Editeurs, 1948) (Arabic text with English Translation); and C.F.S. Seybold (ed.). "Severus Ben El-Moqaffa`: Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum" in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*,Scriptores Arabci,Series Tertia,Tomus IX. (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico,1904); `Abd al-`Aziz Jamal a Dien (ed.) *Tarikh Misr: Min Bidaiat al-Qarn al-Awal al-Milady hata Nihayat al-Qarn al-`Ashreen min khilal Makhtotat Tarikh al-Batarika,Severus ibn al-Moqaffa`* (The History of Egypt from the 1st- 20th Centuries through the History of the Patriarchs of Severus ibn al-Moqaffa`) 4 Vols. in 6 parts. (Cairo: Madbouly Publications, 2006). (Arabic).

There are other historical works by Severus ibn al-Moqaffa`. One of them is a response to the Alexandrian Melkite history of Sa`id ibn al-Batriq.[23] In these works each is defending and praising his religious affiliation after the Chalcedonian schism in 451.

Alexandria was a renowned centre of learning and full of different Greek philosophical schools before the advent of Christianity; there were also many Jewish schools in the city. There was thus a need to start a theological school in the city. St. Jerome asserted that St. Mark himself started the Christian theological school that became "The most renowned intellectual institution in the early Christian world…The preoccupation of this school of exegesis was to discover everywhere the spiritual sense underlying the written word of the scripture". [24] Its founding by Mark might be a legend because the earliest reference to it is around 190 AD.[25]

Most of the church leaders of Alexandria had some connection with this school; they either studied or taught there. Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) was its principal from c.190. He introduced the allegorical interpretation of the Bible because allegory helps the believer to understand the hidden meaning in the Biblical text.[26] Origen (185-254), a Copt who was Clement's student, was influenced by Neo-Platonic philosophy and introduced it into his extensive exegetical works. He eventually established his own (controversial) theological school of thought. The Patriarch Demetrius of Alexandria appointed Origen to lead the school of Alexandria "in order to secure some episcopal control over Christianity's intellectual life". The dispute between them that led Origen to leave Alexandria for Palestine "reflected, not only a dispute over doctrine but also a conflict between two

[23] Sever ibn al-Moquffa`. Refutation De S`id ibn-Batriq(Eutychius), ed. P. Chebli in *Patrologia Orientalis*, Tome III-Fas.2-N˚12 (Turnhout,Belgium : Brepols,1983). (Arabic); L. Cheikho (ed.) *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus*. Series Tertia-Tomus VI (Arabic) (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico, 1905).
[24] Tadros Y. Malaty. "The Rise of Christian Thought: I- Theological Thought in the School of Alexandria". in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr, Suad Abou el Rouss Slim and Joseph Abou Nohra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 122-123.
[25] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 33.
[26] Malaty, "The Rise of Christian Thought", 131. For the full discussion of the two types of Biblical interpretation in the School of Alexandria see Malaty 1127-132.

Christian cultures, academic and episcopal, and their values".[27] Origen's line of thinking was condemned a long time after his death, in the two councils held in Constantinople in 542 and 553.[28]

It is clear what types of Christian thought were prevailing in Egypt at this early time. As Christianity was introduced in Alexandria through direct missions from Palestine, the most probable type of Christianity was Jewish Christianity. But we cannot ignore the influence of the Greek philosophical schools and the Gnostic line of thinking that became more influential on Egyptian Christianity before the Council of Nicaea. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices (1945) shows the influence of Gnosticism in Egypt. This may explain why early orthodox Christian leaders were silent about how Christianity came to Alexandria. It is noted too that Clement and Origen did not mention St. Mark as the founder of Christianity in the city.[29] Moreover, we find St. Clement of Alexandria, and later St Athanasius, used to warn the Christians about Gnostic teaching and its danger on 'Orthodox' faith.[30]

The two second-century Gnostic teachers who influenced religious thinking in Alexandria were Valentinus and Basilides. They developed their theology by elaborating on pre-Christian and pagan thoughts while teaching on the scriptural Logos. For them Jesus, the Logos, was only a representative of God, the Supreme Being in the universe; moreover, for them

> Christ had only an illusory human appearance and did not assume any tangible or material fleshly frame. When it came to the Crucifixion and death, they assert that he was either miraculously saved from the agony or that he had a substitute in the person of Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene. [31]

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[27] Brakke, David. "The East (2): Egypt and Palestine". in The *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 349.
[28] Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity* , 35-37.
[29] Brakke, "The East (2): Egypt and Palestine"., 347.
[30] Malaty, 132. Fr. Malaty is presenting and discussing the Gnostic thoughts and teachings on P.P 132-135.
[31] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 40-41. These ideas had resemblance to the earlier Docetic heresy which were adopted by Islam later on.

By the third century there is good evidence of the growth of the Christian community in Egypt, and there is evidence of Coptic-speaking Christians. The persecutions that the Christians suffered are evidence of their growing presence in Egypt from the edict of Septimius Severus in 202 to the execution of the patriarch, Peter of Alexandria, on 25 November 311.[32]

Some scholars relate early Christianity in Egypt with Palestine. This relation was not only in terms of the Palestinian Jewish influence on the process of evangelization in Egypt, but also the Christian Egyptian influence on Palestine when Origen fled to Palestine from Alexandria. He established his school in Caesarea, which became a Christian teaching centre more important than Jerusalem itself. It is undeniable that his controversial theology, which led to his condemnation in the fifth century, affected the theology of Palestinian Jewish-Christianity.[33]

## Early Christianity in West Syria

West Syrian Christianity is the Christianity in and around Antioch. The Antioch Church has the earliest reference in the New Testament (NT), where it is written in Acts 11:26 how the believers in Christ were called 'Christians' for the first time. This was the result of a joint preaching mission by Paul and Barnabas. The people of this area are the Syriac people, the same people who inhabited Mesopotamia. However, the main difference with Antioch is political affiliation. Antioch was a major city in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It was the most important city in this part of the Empire before Constantine built Constantinople as his capital city.

In different eras of the history of the Syrian Church before the Nestorian controversary there is interrelatedness between the East and West Syrian Churches to the point that it is difficult to separate them. This study concentrates generally on Antioch and the realm of its influence. It is worth noticing that Antioch is still the patriarchal seat (although patriarchs reside in Damascus now) of several ancient churches, namely the Syriac

[32] Timbie, *Coptic Christianity*, 96.
[33] Brakke, "The East (2): Egypt and Palestine" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. 349-350.

Orthodox Church, the Maronite Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Uniate Catholic Churches of the East in communion with Rome.

Although the biblical texts (Acts of the Apostles) show us that Paul was among the first preachers alongside Barnabas in Antioch, Euesbius asserts that the church in Antioch was established by Peter and he became its first bishop before he traveled to Rome to establish his apostolic see over there.[34] This tradition is confirmed today by Syriac Orthodox clergy and theologians. [35]

The struggle over the primacy of sees was, alongside fighting heresies, the driving force behind this history, but it has no material proof; it is more a legendary tradition. Atiya, using Eusebius' History, says that Peter stayed in Antioch for seven years (AD 33-40) before he appointed St. Euodius to replace him. Euodius was martyred during the persecution of Nero (AD. 54-68), then St. Ignatius was ordained by Peter and Paul, as the tradition says, to be the Bishop of Antioch. Ignatius was martyred during the persecution led by Trajan (AD 98-117).[36]

The development of the School of Antioch by the beginning of the third century was a landmark in Antiochian history. This term does not refer to a single theological school as the school of Alexandria, but rather a theological line of thought[37] distinct from the Alexandrian school.[38] Antioch followed the Aristotelian school of Philosophy while Alexandria was following a Platonic school of philosophy. This difference in the philosophical point of view created differences in Christological debates and influenced theological identity later on. While Antioch followed a literal interpretation of the Bible, Alexandria followed an allegorical methodology. While Alexandria was more interested in

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[34] Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity* , 172.
[35] Mar Sawirus Ishak Saka. "The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage (5th to 8th century): Churches of the Syriac Tradition: The West Syriacs" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr ,Suad Abou el Rouss Slim and Joseph Abou Nohra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 235-236.
[36] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 172-173.
[37] In terms of exegetical tradition and Christological understanding
[38] Sebastian P Brock. "The Rise of Christian Thought: The Theological Schools of Antioch, Edessa and Nisibis" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr, Suad Abou el Rouss Slim and Joseph Abou Nohra. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 146.

the unity of the Logos after the incarnation, Antioch was interested in how to explain the different actions of the incarnated Logos. [39] They had two different starting points in understanding the incarnation of the Logos that would affect their expressing of their theology. Though different in theology, however, they were united by persecution under the Roman empire.

Examining the early Christian presence in these three main areas of the Christian world in the first three centuries helps us to understand the theological differences that developed by the turn of the fourth century. Euan Cameron summarizes this era of Christian history around two types of events, namely persecutions and heresies. Persecution was ended in the Roman Empire by Constantine who "offered freedom, toleration and encouragement to Christians" after AD 313. Meanwhile, the question of theological issues intensified between 325 and 450 AD. These issues led to the Church Councils.

> Disagreements over belief were as old as Christianity itself. However, with the rise of a public, official, legally sanctioned structure of the "churches," issues of doctrine could now become issues of allegiance and political power to an unprecedented degree". [40]

## The Christian Struggle from Nicaea to Chalcedon

The definition of faith and the formation of identity were the two active elements in the period from 325 to 451. The conversion of Constantine was a shock to Christians used to persecution and not tolerance in the different parts of the empire. Yet his interference in the affairs of the Christians (claim of protection) in Persia prompted their persecution under Persian rule.[41]

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[39] George C Anawati. *Al-Masehieh wa el-Hadarah el-`Arabiah* (Christianity and Arab Civilization) (Arabic) (Beirut: Al-Muaasash el-`Arabiah le derasat wa al-Nasher,———), 76.

[40] Euan Cameron. *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches` Past*. (Malden (MA): Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 16-17.

[41] Fredrick W. Norris. "Greek Christianities" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (NY: Cambridge University Press,2007),71.

The end of persecution opened the door for theological questions to be more openly addressed in the different parts of the empire. These questions were not new to Christianity; they had their origins in the different philosophies and contexts in which Christianity developed. Karl-Heinz Uthemann discusses all the developments of the Christological formulas, attributing the diversity of these expressions to the "constant changing contexts," which led to "diverse Christological confessions emerging within a broader understanding of the apostolic Kerygma" of the Event of Jesus Christ.[42]

One of the first controversial theologians was Arius (256-336). He was from the region now known as Libya, studied in Antioch, and after becoming a priest he served in Alexandria. His teachings about the Son provoked his patriarch, Alexander of Alexandria. This theological controversary led to the Council of Nicaea (325). Arius taught that the Father is the only true God while the Son is a secondary or lesser deity standing in-between God and human beings, not from the same essence, nature or substance of God the Father. For Arius 'the Father (God) was when the Son was not', so he denied the pre-existence of the Son.[43]

The Coptic bishop Severus/Sawirus ibn al-Moqaffa`, in his history of the councils, accuses Arius of starting to spread his heretical views while the Orthodox Christians were under Diocletian's persecution (303-311 AD).[44] Sawirus gives an overview of the Arian teaching about the Trinity as three gods; one is the creator and the other two are created. The 318 bishops were summoned by the new Christian Emperor to hold their council in Nicaea in 325 where Arius was condemned as a heretic, was deposed of his position and

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[42] Karl-Heinz Uthemann "History of Christology to the Seventh Century" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600,* ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 460; J. Rebecca Lyman "Heresiology: the Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism' " in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 298. Shares Uthemann`s view about the influence of contexts on the diversity of theological expressions and controversaries.

[43] Barry, W. "Arianism" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. Retrieved February 23, 2011 from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01707c.htm; Fredrick W. Norris. "Greek Christianities" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (NY: Cambridge University Press,2007),73. Anawati, 26-27.

[44] Severe ibn al-Moquaffa`. *Histoire Des Conciles* in *Patrologia Orientalis*, Tome 6-Fasc. 4- N˚29, edited by L. Leroy et. S. Grebaut, 2ed Edition (Arabic and French) (Paris: Brepols, 2003), 493-4.

excommunicated. The 318 bishops of Nicaea affirmed the Nicene Creed, which confirmed the faith in the One God, not three, and the Son of God as eternal, not created and from the same substance as God.[45]

Two bishops from the Church of the East attended: Jacob of Nisibis and John of Persia.[46] An Arabian Bishop also attended the Council, Bishop Pamphilus of the Tayenoi, "possibly the bishop of the empire's Arab confederates whom authors referred to by this generic form of the name of the Tayy (Arab) tribe".[47]

Constantine was concerned about the proceedings of the Council and its results, but his concern was more to secure the unity of religion in the empire and eventually the unity of the empire itself. Constantine thus endorsed the canons and decisions of the Nicene Council. Alexander of Alexandria and his deacon Athanasius won the battle against Arius, who was exiled. However, it seems that the Arian teachings had deep roots in the minds and hearts of people. In 328, Constantine brought Arius back from the exile; he reconciled him with the church authorities around 335. Arius was declared an Orthodox Christian again in two local synods of Tyre and Jerusalem.[48] Athanasius (326-373), who became the patriarch of Alexandria, was not happy with the return of Arius, however. Arius was accused of deceiving the emperor by pretending to be orthodox again. Arius' death in 336 was interpreted as God's punishment upon him.[49]

The death of Arius did not end the struggle between the Nicene bishops and the Arians. Constantine himself was baptized before his death in 337 at the hands of an Arian

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[45] Ibid., 494-5.
[46] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 74.
[47] David Thomas. "Arab Christianity" in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Ed. by Ken Parry (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2; J. Spencer Trimingham . *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979) mentions five other names of bishops who represented Arabia in Nicaea. P.P. 65-66;
[48] Norris, "Greek Christianities",74.
[49] While he was going into the church in Alexandria to celebrate communion with Athanasius. Athanasius was praying to God that He may reveal Arius` deception, God responded when Arius had his intestines fallen down out of him and died. Ibn al-Moqaffa`, *Histoire des Concils* ,500. The same story is also related by *Chronique de Seert,* premiere partie II, with elaborations on Arius` deceptive ways to convince the emperor and other bishops with his own heretical views, P.P 246-250.

bishop,[50] and his son Constantius II (337-361) adopted Arianism, which led him to persecute the Nicene bishops including Athanasius, who was exiled several times by the emperor. Athanasius used these exiles to promote the Nicene faith, especially among the bishops of the West. He was also active in writing; he wrote the *Life of Antony*, one of the earliest monks in Egypt, showing that he was anti-Arian monk,[51] and some other rather short theological treatises explaining the Nicene faith and writing against Constantius whom he accused of being the forerunner of Christ.[52] Cyril of Jerusalem (d.387), who refused to confess the Arian faith, suffered exile from Acacius, the (Arian) bishop of Caesarea, who had good relations with the Arian emperor in Constantinople.[53] Jerusalem's support of the Alexandrian bishop and his theology shows the early Coptic influence on Jerusalem and its theology.

To the East, St. Ephrem played a role in defending the Nicene faith and promoting it in Nisibis and Edessa. St. Ephrem (d.373) the Syrian was born and raised in Nisibis and became the head of its famous school. He was reported by the early historians as a defender of Nicaea. It is reported that there were about ten different heresies in Nisibis and then in Edessa at this time, among them the Marcionites. St Ephrem's eagerness to defend the Nicene faith comes from the fact that his bishop Jacob of Nisibis attended the Council, and some legendary sources mention Ephrem himself attending Nicaea.[54] The importance of Ephrem is that he offers evidence that the East and the West were in a way 'united' in accepting the Nicene faith as the foundation stone before the Christological arguments developed further into factions and schisms in the body of the Church. Monks and

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[50] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 71; Barry, "Arianism" in: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01707c.htm.

[51] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 74-75. The detailed account of Athanasius` struggles and exiles, and his influence on the Church of the west and its local councils is found in good summary in Joseph Buhagiar S. J. "The Shaping of Christian Thought: The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople" in *Christianity: A History in the ME*. Bader(ed), 172-177.

[52] J. Stevenson (ed) & W. H. C. Frend (Rev). *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents illustrating the history of the Church, AD 337-461* (London: SPCK,1989), 18, 41, 43.

[53] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 76; A good introduction to Cyril's works, liturgical arguments and theological stand is discussed in Frances M. Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background.* (Grand Rapids: Backer Academic, 2010), 185-193.

[54] Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon,*174-177; Young gives also a brief introduction to Ephrem's writings and theological language on Pages 177-185; Ephrem`s life, teachings and his influence in establishing monastic orders are discussed in Arthur Vööbus. *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East. Vol. II: Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria* (Louvain: Secretariat Du CorpusSCO, 1960), 84-110; *Chroique de Seert*, premiere partie, 293-294.

monastic orders helped in affirming the faith, so it is no wonder that Athanasius's first writing was the *Life of Antony* as an anti-Arian monk.

After the end of the persecution under Julian the Apostate (Roman emperor from 361-363), there were still some theological questions needing to be defined, especially the question of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The issue was raised c.358 in a letter written by Athanasius (in exile) to the bishop of Themuis within the context of the ongoing Arian struggle under Constantius II. Athanasius was responding to a previous letter from this bishop who is reporting to him that some people were denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Athanasius was trying to clarify their doctrine. He says:

> that certain persons, having forsaken the Arians on account of their blasphemy against the Son of God, yet oppose the Holy Spirit, saying that He is not only a creature, but actually one of the ministering spirits (Heb. 1:14), and differs from the angels only in degree.[55]

Although Athanasius did not define this group of persons, he anathematized the Arians and a few other 'heresies' in his Tome of the Council of Alexandria, 362.[56] It seems that the arguments intensified in these twenty years until a council in Constantinople was summoned in 381 to discuss this major issue. One hundred and fifty Eastern bishops attended this council.[57] The council produced what is known as the Nicaeno-Constantinoplian Creed, which affirms the full divinity and humanity of Christ, and also the full divinity of the Holy Spirit.[58] All those denying the divinity of the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit were anathematized. The only problem resulting from this council was the third canon, which states: "The Bishop of Constantinople shall have the Primacy of honor after the Bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is the new Rome".[59]

This statement fired the struggle between Alexandria and Constantinople over primacy because the Alexandrian Bishop saw his see to be the most eligible to be the second in primacy after Rome. This was because of the big role Alexandria had played in Nicaea, in

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[55] Stevenson, *Creeds and Councils*,79.
[56] Ibid., 80-83.
[57] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 83-84.
[58] Stevenson, *Creeds and Councils* ,114-115.
[59] Ibid., 117.

addition to its apostolic importance and theological heritage. The challenge to Alexandria's primacy was an attempt to 'exclude' the "increasing incursions of Alexandria into other domains"; recognizing Constantinople's primacy to the East was to lessen Alexandrian role and influence.[60]

The Alexandrian resistance of the second canon of Constantinople AD 381 started with Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria (Pat.385-412) who refused to accept it. Struggles continued when Cyril of Alexandria (Pat.412-444) became the patriarch. He happened to be Theophilus' nephew as well as his disciple in ecclesiastical matters.[61]

The next Christological controversary was what is known as the Nestorian Controversary. In the wake of the struggles mentioned above, a new bishop was appointed in Constantinople in 428 – Nestorius who was a Syrian trained in monastic life and then priested in Antioch.[62]

Nestorius was famous for being a good preaching bishop, with a zeal against heretics. He mentioned in a letter sent to John, Bishop of Antioch, that there were two groups in Constantinople arguing whether Mary was 'God-bearer' or 'man-bearer'; his proposal to both of these groups was that 'Mary is Christ-bearer' (Christokos), with an emphasis on Jesus' humanity.[63] Cyril found Nestorius' teaching a scandal to the faith of the Church, and so he attacked Nestorius and notified Rome. The Council of Ephesus 431 was then convened.

Whence came Nestorius' teachings? He was a disciple of the Antiochian School, which was influenced by two prominent Antiochian theologians, namely Diodore of Tarsus (Bishop. 378- c.394) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.352-428), who developed Christology emphasizing "the Human being of Christ as 'God and man'". Diodore distinguishes between "the God Logos as the Son of God according to nature and as the Son of David,

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[60] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 85.
[61] Ibid., 86-87.
[62] Socrates. *Histoire Ecclésiastique* (Vol.7, p.29) quoted by Anba Bishoy. "The shaping of Christian Thought II. The Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, The Christological Controversies of the 4th and 5th Centuries" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib & others (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 196.
[63] Ibid., 196.

who is the Son of Mary," while Theodore affirmed the "fundamental formula of Christology: 'two natures and one person'".[64]

Cyril started the meetings of the council in Ephesus before the arrival of the Roman delegates and the Antiochian Bishop. He proceeded against Nestorius, building upon the letters exchanged between them both. In one of those letters Cyril condemned Nestorius with twelve anathemas.

Nestorius refused to attend the Council before the arrival of the other representatives. Despite this he was condemned and deposed. The Roman delegates confirmed the decision, but John of Antioch, Nestorius' friend, and his companions did not. As a result, John was also excommunicated, though he and Cyril would reconcile in 433.

After the Council, Nestorius went back to his monastery in Antioch until Emperor Theodosius II ordered the burning of his books and exiled him to a desert oasis in Egypt. He probably died in 451 before the Council of Chalcedon.[65] Cyril's Christology affirmed the 'one nature of the incarnated Logos' and refused any talk of two natures in Christ.

After the death of Cyril in AD 444, Dioscorus (444-451) held a council in Ephesus in 449 to approve the teachings of Eutyches, an archimandrite [archdeacon] in Constantinople, whose Christology was "Christ has one divine nature". Eutyches went too far with his teaching, affirming "that the humanity of Christ was dissolved in the divinity as a drop of vinegar would dissolve in the ocean". This teaching contradicted Cyril's affirmation of faith which says of "the One Nature of the Incarnated Logos". Eutyches also was not in good terms with Flavian, his bishop in Constantinople who appealed to Leo, Bishop of Rome, to stop the Council (called by Emperor Theodosius II) that was held without his

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[64] Uthemann, "History of Christology", 474-478. Uthemann is presenting the Christological arguments and the Greek terminologies used in the controversary in details. I am not including them here because they are not the object of this study; Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*. gives a good study about Theodore pp. 261-274 with a section on his Christology, 269-72.

[65] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 88-89; Chapman, J. "Nestorius and Nestorianism" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. Retrieved November 19, 2010 from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10755a.htm; Bishoy, 202-204. For the full account of Ephesus Canons which were entirely dedicated to the Nestorian controversary, see Stevenson, *Creeds and Councils*, 310-312.

consent. All the scholars, especially the Coptic historians and bishops, agree that Dioscorus was deceived by Eutyches in Ephesus in 449 and describe Eutyches' teaching as heretical. The Copts did, however, accept the council to be an ecumenical council, not a '*Robber'* council as the Chalcedonians described it afterwards.[66] The importance of this council came from its other decisions concerning the spread of Nestorian teachings to the East (Edessa), which had started to formulate a distinct identity as a Nestorian Church under the leadership of Ibas, the bishop of Edessa within the Persian territories.

In 451 the new emperor Marcian summoned a council in Chalcedon to discuss the results of Ephesus II (449), which had caused factions in the Church. The emperor was interested in uniting the Church in the interest of uniting the Empire.[67] Leo was not happy with having another council, fearing further factions would result. To achieve unity and peace the Council had three tasks: to accept Cyril's theology in Ephesus I, to affirm the condemnation of Nestorius, and to bring the Roman and Antiochian Christology into a compromise.[68]

More than five hundred bishops (Ibn al-Batriq said 630) [69] attended the council, most of them from the Eastern Churches, though Armenia and Ethiopia were not represented. The Council had started with questioning Dioscorus about Eutyches` teachings and ended up by anathematizing both of them. Although the Council's 'definition of Faith' included the two creeds of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), along with Leo's Tome against Eutyches and Cyril's anathemas against Nestorius[70], Dioscorus refused to accept the

[66] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 89-90; Bishoy, "The Shaping of Christian Thought", 210-211; For full introduction of Eutychianism see Chapman, J. "Eutychianism" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. Retrieved February 23, 2011 from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05633a.htm; Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 177.
[67] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 90.
[68] Uthemann, "History of Christology", 488.
[69] Cheikho, L. (ed.). *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus.* Series Tertia-Tomus VI (Arabic) (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico, 1905), 181.
[70] For full documents of the Council of Chalcedon see Stevenson, *Creeds and Councils*, 350-362;

results of the Council. He was deposed and exiled alongside Eutyches. Church politics and personal interests played a big role in the decisions. [71]

There are different explanations for what had happened in Chalcedon. Some affirm that what happened was the result of the struggle between the East and the West. The new pro-western emperor (with the help of Rome) pressed to humble Alexandria, which had played a big role so far in the Christian History of the Empire, and their desire to elevate and strengthen Constantinople to be next to Rome in primacy.[72] Or as a Coptic writer explains it "In Rome, the predominance of Alexandrian Theology was viewed with alarm, and steady maneuvers were taken to reverse it" and accomplished in Chalcedon.[73] Others see in the Chalcedonian struggle 'a difference in terminology' in expressing the same faith which emerged from the anti-Arian Christology.[74] The Coptic historians defend Dioscorus as a national hero who suffered (and after him the whole Coptic/Monophysite Church) from the Roman Emperors who persecuted them and wanted to force them to accept the Chalcedonian Faith.[75] Ibn al-Batriq, the Melkite historian, reported that Dioscorus went to Palestine after his exile and corrupted the faith of the people of Jerusalem, which made him an infidel and unbeliever.[76] Aziz Atiya, as a Coptic writer, defended the national Egyptian movement wanting to be independent from the western dominion over the Eastern Church, and at the same time he defended the Coptic stand from Nicaea which affirms 'two natures, divine and human, mystically united in One, without confusion, corruption or change'. He interpreted the Byzantine appointment of Proterius as the Bishop of Alexandria after the death of Dioscorus, and the election of Timothy Aelurus (the Cat) by the Copts to be their Patriarch, in terms of defending their national spirit and church. Proterius was killed by the Alexandrian natives,[77] while Timothy was deposed and

[71] See a vivid description of the council in W.H.C. Frend. *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 47.
[72] Ibid., 50-51.
[73] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 177.
[74] Uthemann, "History of Christology", 492; Anawati, *Christianity and Arab Civilization* (AR), 28-30,32.
[75] Ibn al-Moquaffa`, *Histoire des Councils*, 514-17; Ibn al- Moquaffa`, *History of the Patriarchs*, 444.
[76] Cheikho, *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus*, 183.
[77] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 69-71.

exiled by Emperor Leo I in 560.[78] Those events sparked the struggle between the three Christian Churches, each declaring itself to be the only 'Orthodoxy'.

The role of national spirit and of political context supported by the monastic orders had great impact; they led to the birth of missionary campaigns to spread these strands of Christianity. The early struggles among the different Christian churches affected the unity of the empire and in a way weakened it in the face of the rising power coming from Arabia in few decades. The discussion of these developments will come after presenting the main efforts made by succeeding Roman emperors to re-unite the empire.

## Attempts at Unity

Schism among the Christians was one of the main concerns of the Roman emperors. Zeno (474-491) who was a Chalcedonian emperor[79] worked with Acacius, the patriarch of Constantinople, on a proposal known as *Henotikon* (Act of Union, 482) to address this. Acacius opened the discussion with Peter Mongus of Alexandria (and Peter Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch, and Martyrius, the Patriarch in Jerusalem) to recognize the first three councils and Chalcedon while avoiding any explicit mention of the 'two natures'. It seems that initial acceptance by those patriarchs was secured, however, the proposal was abrogated by Rome because it did not include the *Tome of Leo*. Felix III excommunicated Acacius in 484, which led to what is known as the *Acacian Schism* between Rome and Constantinople. It lasted until 519.[80]

Zeon's proposal failed and his attempt to unite the empire in fact caused a schism between Rome and Constantinople. At this time, Severus was elected the patriarch of Antioch (512-518). He was a Monophysite who wrote against Chalcedon and established Monophysitism in Antioch. He was exiled in 518 by Justin I (518- 527) and fled to Alexandria where Patriarch Timothy IV gave him shelter. Justin appointed another Melkite

[78] Norris, "Greek Christianities", 96.
[79] Accused by Ibn al-Batriq to be Jacobite emperor in Cheikho, *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus*, 186.
[80] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 71-72; Norris, "Greek Christianities", 96-97; Bishoy, "The Shaping of Christian Thought", 213.

patriarch in his place. As a result the See of Antioch was divided into two patriarchates; even today one is Chalcedonian/Melkite and the other is Monophysite.[81]

The second attempt to re-unite the Christians in the empire was led by Justinian I (527-565) and his wife Theodora. Justinian was a Chalcedonian while his wife was secretly a Monophysite. He was keen not to quarrel with the Egyptians because he needed their political and economic support. He called the Council of Constantinople II (553) to discuss different theological issues and try to find unity among the Christians. There was heavy Eastern representation at the Council; among them was Severus of Antioch, the champion of Monophysitism. Each party insisted on his own stand from Chalcedon. The emperor did not succeed in achieving a compromise with the Egyptians and their allies, even though he condemned the *Three Chapters* of the three pillars of Nestorianism, namely Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's writing against Cyril of Alexandria, and the letter of Ibas of Edessa praising Nestorius.[82] Constantinople II also failed to secure the unity of the Church.

The last attempt was led by Emperor Heraclius (610-641) in 616. The political situation in the eastern parts of the empire had deteriorated after the fall of Syria, Palestine and Egypt to the Persians under the leadership of Choseros II (590-628). The great Sassanid army had started to invade these territories from 611 and completed its mission by the fall of Egypt to the borders of Libya west and of Ethiopia to the south in 620. Chalcedonians in these areas suffered from the Persian invaders because they were the 'Melkite' party. The Monophysites who were the majority in Syria and Egypt and suffered long years of Byzantium persecution did not resist, but perhaps welcomed the new invaders whom they received as liberators.[83] In the light of this possibility, Heraclius discovered the importance of getting the trust and support of the Monophysite Christians in these areas in order to defeat the Persians and regain the lost territories.

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[81] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 179.
[82] Ibid., 73; Norris, "Greek Christianities",104-105.
[83] Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, "Beyond Empire I: Eastern Christianities from the Persian to the Turkish Conquest, 604-1071" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600-c. 1100*, ed. by Thomas F.X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith; assistant editor, Roberta A. Baranowski, Vol.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 70-71.

In 616, Sergius of Constantinople proposed what is known as the *Monothelete Doctrine* which is "the oneness of Christ's human and divine wills, which were identical, unchanging, and harmonious" (the One Will of Christ) without emphasizing the issue of two natures.[84] This proposal was trying, with hope, to convince the Monophysites to accept the Chalcedonian faith and thus reunite the empire again at the beginning of Heraclius' war to regain Syria, Palestine and Egypt from Persian hands. Heraclius was convinced of this new proposal and declared it officially in 622. Athanasius of Antioch (621-629) and Honorius of Rome (625-638) accepted the new doctrine, but it was rejected by the Copts. Aziz Atiya, as a Coptic historian, defended the Coptic stand using three arguments: first, there was no trust in the Byzantium proposals anymore; second, the Copts were afraid that by accepting this new doctrine they would depart from the teachings of Athanasius and Cyril; lastly, the national spirit of the Copts was growing greater against any imperial authority and declarations.[85]

Theophanes the Confessor, the Melkite Byzantine historian, defends Heraclius' efforts to unite the church and the empire in his war against Persia. His main argument was to present the war as a '*religious war*'. Choseros is quoted saying that he will not stop the war against Byzantium until Heraclius departs his faith in 'the Crucified One' and worship the Sun.[86] It is also worth noting that the new Chalcedonian Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (634-638) opposed this new doctrine.[87] Sophronius opposed Heraclius' proposal when he was a monk, however, after becoming the patriarch, he "had sworn an oath never to attack Monotheletism, and in fact he never explicitly attacked it".[88] This interest in the theological stand of Jerusalem explains Heraclius' efforts to return the Holy Cross personally to Jerusalem after its recovery from Persia. The Maronites, while still on the edge of Antioch near Aleppo, were the only group who accepted it and lived with it till

[84] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 75-76; Dorfmann-Lazarev, "Beyond Empire", 72.
[85] Atiya, 76.
[86] Mango & Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 433.
[87] Dorfmann-Lazarev, "Beyond Empire", 73.
[88] Walter Kaegi. *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 209.

it was abrogated in Constantinople III (680). Indeed, they were the only 'Melkites' in the empire during that period.[89]

Unfortunately, Heraclius, after liberating Egypt and the other territories from the Persians and relocating the Holy Cross again in Jerusalem in 628, tried to force the Copts to accept his *Monothelete* doctrine. He appointed Cyrus to be the Melkite/Chalcedonian Patriarch and the Ruler of Egypt in 631. Cyrus' mission was to force the Copts to accept Chalcedon and Monotheletism, so he persecuted the Copts till the coming of Islam in 641.[90]

## The Formation of three different Christian Identities and their Geographical Locations

The different political, national, cultural, ecclesial and social contexts played a big role in the formation of three distinct 'Orthodoxies' in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt - namely the Chalcedonian, the Monophysite and the Nestorian churches. Frend summarizes well the main three factors that led to the struggles among these Churches from the beginning.[91]

The first factor is language. There was a change from local languages like Syriac and Coptic, with all that they represent in terms of expressions and philosophy, to Greek with all its rich philosophical implications. The church leaders had been educated in Greek while the people, including monks and priests, were still using their local languages (there were other local languages such as Ethiopian and Armenian). The leaders became alienated from their people as a result.

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[89] Elias Khalifeh El-Hachem, "The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage (5th to 8th century): Churches of the Syriac tradition: The Maronites" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr & others (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 280-281.

[90] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 77; Kaegi provides more details about Heraclius efforts to convince the Monophysites in Syria and Egypt to unite with the Melkites on his proposed doctrine of *Monotheletism.* After the failure of his negotiations, he decided to appoint the Melkite Bishop in Alexandria as its civil ruler in order to put pressures on the Copts. Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 214-217.

[91] Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, IX-X.

The second factor is the difference in the historical background, as stated above (not to forget the development of Latin as a language in the West, especially in Rome).[92] The churches also had different cultural and ecclesial traditions (including the struggle for primacy and proof of apostolicity). These differences contributed to the rise of regional and national bias.

The third factor is the clash between the two different ecclesiastical hierarchies. The collegial system in the East founded on autocephalous relations, and the authoritative system of Rome in the West, which claimed supremacy over others as the See of St. Peter, was a fact the Eastern churches were only too aware of.[93] Though the Bishop of Rome did not attend any church council, he used to send letters or delegates to the councils and use his power (and relations) over the emperors to steer the results of those councils. It is also evident that the bishops of Rome were concerned with decreasing the Alexandrian role after the council of Nicaea in which the leadership of Alexandria against Arius was strong.

After exploring the Christian dogmatic struggles that had socio-political influences, and the failure of the Roman emperors to unite the empire, they saw in unity an element of power. The relevant questions are how did these three Churches develop their identity in place, context and time from the fifth to the beginning of the seventh centuries? How did these divided loyalties affect the empire's strength and control? What was the situation before the coming of Islam? Was the Christian dogmatic struggle then influential in the formation of Islamic theological identity?

**The Nestorian Church**

We have seen how Nestorian teaching was condemned as ‘heresy’ in Ephesus 431. Moreover, the council, under the leadership of Cyril, was aware enough to condemn the origin of the Nestorian Dyophysite doctrine concerning the two natures of Christ. This doctrine originated in the Antiochian theological and philosophical school led by Diodore of Tarsus and most importantly Theodore of Mopsuestia (392-428). The school that

[92] E. Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 15.
[93] Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, IX-X.

cultivated the thinking of those theologians was the school of Edessa, which inherited the school of Nisibis after the fall of the latter to the Persians in 363 when leading theological teachers like Ephrem the Syrian moved to Edessa.[94] The school of Nisibis and then in Edessa until that time was in the line of the universal church; Ephrem and Jacob of Nisibis attended Nicaea and accepted its canons. Before the Nestorian controversary started there were three major synods within the Persian territories that kept the Nicene Faith intact, and these synods developed some political decisions concerning the relationship of the Nestorian Church with the Byzantine Empire.

The first synod (410) was called the Synod of Isaac and held in the Persian capital city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The call to this synod was initiated by the Byzantine ambassador and friend of the Persian King, Yazdgird I, and Bishop Marutha of Maipherqat. The synod officially adopted Nicaean Creed and as a result, Christianity was acknowledged in the Persian Empire, with some self-autonomy where the Bishop could manage the 'civil' affairs of his people.[95]

The second synod of Dadisho` (424) in al-Hira south of Iraq was a political turning point in the history of the church of the East. This synod announced the independence of the church of the East from Western influence in order to eliminate any future accusation against the Christians from the Persian authorities. The synod also affirmed the primacy of the Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.[96] Mari Ibn Suleiman, the Nestorian historian, had reported struggles between Dadisho` and Bahram the Persian King.[97] It seems that the synod was convened for this political decision only. Brock says that there were no creedal statements issued from this synod and from a previous local synod of 420.[98] Other scholars

[94] Atiya, *A History Eastern Christianity*, 249.
[95] Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, 35-36; Sebastian Brock. "The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to the early Seventh Centuries " in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology* selected & edited articles by S. Brock, article XII: 125-142. (Hampshire: Variorum / Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1992) is providing the translation of the canons of this synod and all the other synods with an introductory remarks and analysis.
[96] Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, 36.
[97] Gismondi, Henricus (ed.). *Maris Amri Et Slibae : De Patriarchis Nestorianorum, Commentaria*. (Arabic text) (Rome: Excudebat C. De. Luigi, 1899), 36-37.
[98] Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*,126.

attribute this political decision of the independence of the church of the East to the earlier synod of 420, which was adopted in a major synod of 424.[99]

At this time Edessa was growing as a centre of Antiochian Theology in whose womb Nestorius was born and gained his theology. After the end of Ephesus and the exile of Nestorius, Edessa leaned toward the Theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia under the leadership of Rabbula, the bishop of Edessa. Rabbula changed his theological position, adopted the Cyrillian Theology and started to ban the writings of Theodore and Nestorius from Edessa. His actions were not in harmony with his clergy and monks. (He was known for his aggressive actions toward all who disagreed with his doctrine; historians say that he persecuted the Jews and the pagans in Edessa).[100]

After the death of Rabbula in 435, Ibas was elected as the Bishop of Edessa (435-457). Ibas (Hiba) sympathized with the Nestorian doctrine. He translated the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia into the Syriac language. After the death of Ibas, the next bishop of Edessa was a Monophysite who created tension with the leader of the School of Edessa, Barsauma. Barsauma and his colleagues (in particular Narsai) who followed the Nestorian faith fled to Nisibis within the Persian territories after the closure of the School of Edessa in 489 by Emperor Zeno. There they were received by the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and they re-established the School of Nisibis, which became one of the greatest theological schools in the area up to the Islamic era.[101]

In 486, a third major synod of the church of the East was held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon under the Catholicos Acacius/Akakios. This synod was the first to adopt the Antiochian Christology without stating openly that the Church was 'Nestorian'. In fact, this synod was under the influence of the synod of Beit Lapat (484), which had been held earlier under the

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[99] David Bundy, "Early Asian and East African Christianities" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 133.
[100] Ibid. 129.
[101] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 250-252; Bundy, "Early Asian",133-134; For the story of the School of Nisibis G.J. Reinink". Edessa Grew Dim and Nisibis Shone Forth: The School of Nisibis at the Transition of the 6th-7th Centuries" in *Syriac Christianity under Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Rule*, 77-89. Selected & edited articles by G.J. Reinink. (Hampshire: Variorum / Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005).

leadership of Barsauma.[102] The main result – and the object of these synods – was to adopt an independent theology for an independent Church with a leadership independent from the Byzantine Empire, the natural enemy of Persia. Christians suffered persecution under the Persians as they were accused of collaborating with the Byzantines. Announcing their independence from the Byzantine authority improved their status in the eyes of the Persian king who started to trust them.

Developments in the Nestorian Church continued through the following synods. There is confusion in some texts in regard to confessing the Nestorian Dyophysite doctrine (i.e. in synod 554 there is a statement which says "those who speak of two Christs or two Sons are specifically anathematized" which reflects Chalcedonian influence).[103] Meanwhile, struggles with the Monophysites, who were also present within the Persian empire, helped the Church of the East to finally form its identity in 612 when the Persian King Choseros ordered a disputation between the Syrian Orthodox Monophysite and the Church of the East clergy. Representatives of the church of the East, under the leadership of Babai the Great (569-628), presented in this disputation their final stand on Christology in a letter to the King. Here is a short quotation from that letter:[104]

> And because created natures were unable to see the glorious nature of his divinity, he fashioned for himself in exalted manner, from the nature of the house of Adam, a holy temple from the blessed Virgin Mary, a complete man, who was completed without the intercourse with a man that follows the natural course (of events). And he put him on and united him to himself, and in him he was revealed to the world.

The Church of the East was a missionary church that spread the message of Christianity to different parts of the world, within its Middle Eastern context and to the East reaching India and China. Nestorian Christianity was also spread among Arabs, especially those tribes who moved early to the north and settled down in Mesopotamia. The major Arab

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[102] Bundy, "Early Asian",133; Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*,126, and the translation of the synod's canons are found on P.133-134.

[103] Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, 127, 135.

[104] Ibid. 127, 140-141; G.J. Reinink, "Tradition and Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in the Sixth-to Seventh- Century Iraq" in *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1-3(2009):217-250 presents a full account of the theological debate between the Monophysites and Nestorians specially in the School of Nisibis within the theological, cultural, and political context of the 6th- early7th centuries.

Christian tribe within the Persian territories was Tanukh in al-Hira to the south. Reports confirm that the Bishop of al-Hira (Hosea) had attended the Synods of the Church of the East in 410 and 424. Having a bishop at that early stage suggests that they were an organized Christian group. They were known as *`Ibad* which means the 'worshippers/servants' of Christ. The Christian Arab historian Irfan Shahid says that the term *`Ibad* was a title given to different Arab tribes who were united by their Christian faith.

The strong Christian presence in the area is evident in the presence of several churches and monasteries. One of those monasteries was built by Hind, the wife of Al-Munther III (c.505-554), and named after her as *'Handmaiden of Christ'.* However, al-Nu`man III (580-602), the last Lakhmid king, was the only king to be baptized. After his death the Persians reduced the power of the Lakhmid rulers to a tribal chief under a Persian governor.[105] They also had a strong presence in Najran, Yemen, Qatar and alongside the eastern coast line of Arabia. These areas were under the Persian rule, which helped the church to expand in the area.[106]

**The Monophysite Churches**

The Monophysite Churches are the Coptic church of Egypt and the Syrian Church, which came to be known as the Jacobite Church. These two churches stayed faithful to the tradition and theology of Cyril the Great who opposed the Nestorian teaching by asserting the 'One Nature of the incarnated Logos'. Other national churches following the Monophysite faith, such as Armenia and Ethiopia, were not represented in Chalcedon.

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[105] Shahid, Irfan. "Arab Christianity before the Rise of Islam" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr & others (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches,2005), 440-442; Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 276; Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*,43-44. Rassam says that al-Nu`man III was assassinated by the Sassanid Persians; The Nestorian Chronicle of *de Seert* gives a full account of the conversion of al-Nu`man , Deuxieme Part II, 467-9.

[106] Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, 44- 45; There is an interesting and important archaeological study done by a scholar from Durham University in UK about the Christian presence in the Gulf area which shows the influence of the Church of the East in what today is Qatar, the Arab Emirates and others. This presence was still active till the middle of the 8th Cent. See R.A. Cater, "Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam" in *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 19 (2008): 71-108. The first Christian archaeological site was opened for the public in UAE was launched in Dec. 2010, http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/uae-s-first-christian-archaeological-site-opens-2010-12-11-1.327810; See also Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 272-284.

Their decision to refuse Chalcedon was in part because of their feeling neglected from the councils, and also because Ethiopia had historical relations with the See of Alexandria, which seems to have played the big role in keeping this national church – and the Nubian Church – on good terms with Alexandrian Theology.[107]

Coptic Christianity "refers to the traditions of the Copts, the indigenous, generally non-Greek, inhabitants of Egypt".[108] The Copts followed their native Patriarch Dioscorus I after he was deposed in Chalcedon. They refused to accept the authority of the Greek bishop who was appointed by the Byzantine emperor to force, or convince, the Christian population of Egypt to accept the decisions and faith of Chalcedon 451. Since that time there have been two patriarchs in Alexandria; one is Coptic Monophysite and the other is Chalcedonian Melkite.

The struggle between these two traditions continued throughout the centuries from Chalcedon to the Arab conquest of Egypt. The struggle was political, social and cultural. It was a struggle for the Coptic identity. The Copts suffered persecution from the Byzantine emperors who tried to press them to change their theological position and unite with the Melkite Church. W.H.C. Frend presents answers to the question: Why did the Coptic Church, as leaders and people, not rise in revolution against the Byzantine authorities after the Chalcedonian conflict (and after the failures of the emperors to re-unite the church with their proposals)?

The first answer lies in the nature of the Monophysite movement as not a partisan/separatist political movement. It was rather a theological movement within the national context that believed that the "One Nature doctrine represent the sacred unity between Christ and the imperial realm".[109] The Copts could differentiate between their loyalty to their faith and their loyalty to the Christian emperor. This is evident in the way

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[107] David Bundy gives a brief and good account on these three Monophysite churches, "Early Asia and East African Christianities", 136-7, 140-1; There are also good and detailed articles about these churches in Bader, *Christianity: A History in the M.E.*; Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 296-315.
[108] Bundy, 140.
[109] W. H. Frend, "Nationalism as a Factor in Anti-Chalcedonian Feeling in Egypt" in *Religion and National Identity: Papers Read at the Nineteenth Summer Meeting and the Twentieth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. by Stuart Mews (Oxford: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by B. Blackwell, 1982), 22.

the Copts dealt with the invading armies of Egypt and other parts of the Roman Empire. Ibn al-Mouqaffa`, in his History of the Patriarchs, states clearly that the Persian invasion and capture of Egypt in the beginning of the seventh century was done by a pagan king – worshipping the Sun – who persecuted the monks and the Christians and killed many of them. Choseros was condemned in the Coptic writings.[110]

The second answer lies in the Coptic emphasis on their Christian identity in general. They were not as proud of their pagan Egyptian glories or the Hellenistic impact on them as much as their Christian identity.

> Christianity…gave the Copts a sense of identity and purpose that they had lacked for centuries. It liberated them from the thralldom of age-old fears and superstitions, and for the first time gave them a conviction that their Christian wisdom was superior to all the philosophy and arguments of their Greek masters.[111]

There are also three motivations that played a great role in affirming the Monophysite faith among the Copts. The first was the creation of a separate Coptic clerical hierarchy. This process was the result of the failure of the different Byzantine emperors to force the Copts to accept a Chalcedonian patriarch in Alexandria, and also after Justin I (518-527) abrogated Zeno's *Henotikon* and started persecuting the priests who did not confirm to the Chalcedonian Faith. Moreover, the escape of Severus of Antioch to Egypt as a Monophysite Patriarch encouraged the reluctant Coptic patriarch, Theodosius (535–567) to ordain an opposition hierarchy. (The need to take this action was intensified after Justinian appointed a Greek patriarch in Alexandria to weaken the Coptic leadership).[112] Severus's escape at the beginning of Justin's rule in 518 put the Coptic Church and the Syrian Orthodox (Antiochian) church in one theological agreement. Severus was the first to ordain the Monophysite priests in 530, followed by Theodosius who consecrated twelve bishops in Egypt. The influence of those bishops is difficult to determine until the coming of Peter IV (567–569) who consecrated seventy Coptic bishops in 576. This year is a

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[110] Ibn al-Mouqaffa`, *History of the Patriarchs*, Vol.2, 484-486; Frend, "Nationalism", 36; Mango & Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 433-435.
[111] Frend, "Nationalism", 23-24.
[112] Ibn al-Mouqaffa`, *History of the Patriarchs*, Vol.2, 455-469 describes the purposes, conflicts and results of this action. He accuses the emperor of dividing the church in Egypt into Copts and Melkites, however, the people stayed faithful to their patriarch and faith.

landmark in the final creation of a separate Coptic episcopate and clergy from the Chalcedonian/Melkite Church under the leadership of the Coptic Patriarch. [113]

The second motivation was the role that the monasteries played among the people. Monasticism is very old in Egypt, and we have seen that Athanasius's first work after Nicaea 325 was to write the *Life of Antony,* who was one of the first anchorites in the Egyptian dessert. Knowing the impact of the monks on the people, Athanasius showed Antony as anti-Arian monk. It was the same attitude in the later struggles; monks and monastic orders played a very big role in establishing the Monophysite faith in Egypt and Syria, as they did in the Nestorian Church and its monasteries in the Persian Empire. Some of the monks were theologians who supported their churches by teaching the people. They also used different charitable services to help the people at times of difficulty. It is worth knowing also that according to the Coptic tradition, the patriarch is usually elected from among the monks, who were known as pious and great defenders of the Cyrillian Christology. Monasteries have been centers of evangelization, pilgrimage and retreat. All these activities put the monks in direct contact with the people.[114]

The third motivation was the development of anti-Chalcedonian literature. Writing history in the Coptic tradition was an anti-Chalcedonian, and anti-Nestorian, action on the part of clergy and historians to show the 'orthodoxy' of their patriarchs and people who kept the faith intact. The records of the martyrs in the Coptic Church, before Constantine's embrace of Christianity and throughout history, have been polemical works against pagans and 'unorthodox' Christians. This is evident in the titles of some books written by Bishop Ibn al-Mouqaffa`, who wrote to refute the Melkite bishop and historian Ibn al-Batriq, for example *The Refutation of Ibn Al-Batriq*.[115] Although most of these works were written in

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[113] Frend, "Nationalism", 34.

[114] Ibid., 34-35; Pope Shenouda III, the present patriarch of the Coptic Church presents a brief study on the Coptic Ascetic Movement and its role in the life of the Church in Bader, *Christianity: A History in the M.E.*, 375-384; A good study about monasticism, its role, types and influence in the different Eastern Churches by Samuel Rubenson, "Asceticism and Monasticism, I: Eastern". In *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c.600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris, 637-668 (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[115] For detailed study and presentation of the Coptic anti-Chalcedonian literature see David W. Johnson, "Anti-Chalcedonian Polemics in Coptic Texts, 451-641" in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*. ed. by Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, 216-234 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa'.

Coptic, there were many written in Greek, which indicates the writers' intentions to influence a wider audience, and maybe for evangelizing purposes.

The second Monophysite Church is the West Syrian or what is known as the Syriac Orthodox Church. It is actually the See of Antioch, which accepted the results of the Council of Ephesus 431 after reconciliation happened between Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch in 433. This reconciliation created between these two sees a kind of bond. When Severus of Antioch (ca. 465-538) became the Bishop of Antioch in 512 he was an eager Monophysite theologian who wrote in Greek against Chalcedon, though his works survived in Syriac. His election as a Monophysite bishop was a sign of the prevailing theological line among the clergy in Antioch at that time. He developed good relations with Alexandria. He studied in Alexandria, and it was his refuge after being deposed and exiled by Justin I in 518. After being excommunicated by the synod of Constantinople in 536 (he died in 538), he initiated the consecration of Monophysite bishops among the Syrian people and encouraged the Coptic Patriarch to do so. This move created the separate Antiochian Monophysite church from the Melkite patriarch approved by the emperor.[116]

Excommunicating Severus of Antioch in Constantinople came as a result of the failure of the theological conversations between the Chalcedonians and Syrian Monophysites under Justinian in 532. The aim of those conversations was to re-unite the Church and discuss how to overcome the dispute over the canons of Chalcedon. The texts recorded by the Syrian bishops show how the dialogue failed. First, the other party had refused to make official record of the conversations, and second, the emperor's reaction during the

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*Réfutation de Sa'īd ibn-Batriq (Eutychius) : Le livre des conciles / Sévère ibn-al-Moquaffa*' ; texte arabe inèdit, In *Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma.Patrologia Orientalis* publié et traduit par P. Chébli.2 Vols. (Turnhout, Belgique: Brepols, 1983) ; Timothy Aelurus. *L'homélie sur l'église du Rocher / attribuée à Timothée Ælure*. Trans. & Ed. Anne Bouvarel-Boud'hors, Ramez.Boutros and Colin, Gérard.in *Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma.Patrologia Orientalis* (Turnhout, Belgique: Brepols, 2001) is an anti-Chalcedonian homily. I have used it above while taking about the origins of Christianity in Egypt.

[116] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*,178-179.

conversations was biased. He listened to the Chalcedonian point of view and devalued what the Syrian bishops were saying.[117]

Two important bishops were consecrated after Severus's death, Jacob Baradæus to be the bishop of Edessa and Theodore of Arabia. Both were consecrated by Theodosius, Bishop of Alexandria who was exiled in Constantinople. The consecration took place in 542 in a difficult time for the Syrian Church. It was suffering persecution, led by Justinian, who was struggling to re-unite the Church and the empire. Justinian needed unity in a time of war with the Persians that lasted till 545. Historical accounts affirm that the consecration of Jacob and Theodore was by an initiative of al-Harith Ibn Jabala, the Arab Ghassanid King. Al-Harith and Banu Ghassan were Monophysites and he asked the empress Theodora, who was supporting the Monophysites, to interfere in this matter.[118] Justinian was not able to refuse this request of al-Harith because he was in a great need of his support. Ghassanids remained good allies with Byzantium until the coming of Islam.

All that we know about Theodore is that he became the bishop of Arabia, specially to Banu Ghassan in Palestine, south of Syria and Arabia. Jacob proved to be a very active bishop who did not reside in Edessa as he should have. He wandered around in all the areas of West Syria reaching Egypt in tireless efforts to promote Monophysitism by consecrating bishops and ordaining clergy. He used to travel, disguising himself from his persecutors with rags and animal leather. That is why he was called Jacob of Baradæus (Barda`i in Arabic means the one covered with rags). There are some legendary stories related to his travels, the places he visited and the number of bishops and clergy he ordained before he died in 578. As a result of his efforts, the Syrian Church came to be called 'Jacobite'.[119]

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[117] The full text of these conversations is translated from Syriac by S. Brock, "The Conversations with the Syrian Orthodox Under Justinian (532) in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology*. Selected & edited articles by S. Brock, article XIII: 87-12 (Hampshire: Variorum /Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1992).

[118] J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 165-166; Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 180-181.

[119] For more of Jacob's life and missions: Atiya, 180-184; Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 167-8; Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 245-246.

Jacob also played a big role in establishing the Jacobite Church in Persia. It is said that he visited the court of Chosroes I (531-77) in 559 to ask him to tolerate the Monophysites within his territories. Chosroes responded to his request positively and Jacob established for the first time the position of the 'Metropolitan of the East' and appointed a bishop for it.[120] The presence of the Jacobites in Mesopotamia within the Persian Empire goes back to the movement of the School of Nisibis to Edessa when two theological directions started to clash. The Persians tolerated the Nestorians as the 'national church' in Persia, while they suspected all other Christians who had links with a church in the Byzantine Empire.[121] Recognition of the Jacobite church in Persia was delayed due to political struggles until the third year of Islamic Hijra specially among Banu Taghlib, the Arab Tribe who resided in North Mesopotamia, with Takrit as its principal see.[122] Suha Rassam, an Iraqi historian, said that Chosroes acknowledged the Jacobites after the visit of Jacob Baradæus but under one Christian leadership: the Catholicos of the church of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The official recognition of a separate head of the Jacobite Church was accomplished in 629 in Takrit (and not in the Capital), after the death of Chosroes in 628.[123]

The presence of the two Christian Churches in Mesopotamia led to dialogue between them on the one hand, and to rivalries and hatred on the other. We should not forget that they are the legitimate heirs of the Nestorian-Cyrillian conflict in Ephesus 431. We have seen already how the clash between them led Chosroes to call upon them to defend their own faith in 612. The result of this theological debate was the final formation of the Nestorian doctrine in the theological letter submitted to the Persian Emperor in 612.[124]

The Egyptian monasteries played a great role in spreading the Monophysite faith in Egypt and played the same role in Syria and Mesopotamia. There is a record of a great number of

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[120] Atiya, 183-184; Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 169-170.
[121] For the details of the theological struggles in the School of Nisibis at this stage see G.J. Reinink, "Tradition and the Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in Sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq" in *CHRC* 89.13 (2009): 217-250.
[122] *Chronique de Seert*, Deuxieme Partie II, (Arabic & French), 542-44.
[123] Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, 66-67. Rassam gives more details about the See of Takrit, and mission of the Jacobite Church in Iraq in the following pages.
[124] Brock provides the full text and its context in *Studies in Syriac Christianity*; article XII, 127, 140-142.; For more examples about the social problems between the Jacobites and the Nestorians Michael G. Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq" in *Muslims and others in Early Islamic Society*, edited by Robert Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate/ Variorum Publishing Ltd, 2004), 116-118.

monasteries spreading in Syria and Mesopotamia before Ephesus and Chalcedon Councils. The struggle over controlling those monasteries in Mesopotamia was one of the aspects of the clash. New types of ascetic life were created, not known in Egypt, such as the Stylite monks who used to spend all their lives on ancient pillars or built their own. This type of asceticism was originated by Simeon the Stylite in the mid-fifth century around Antioch and continued through Arab rule.[125]

**The Chalcedonian/Melkite Church**

The Chalcedonian/Melkite Church was the Christian tradition that followed the Chalcedonian resolutions in the East, as well as the see of Rome in the West and North Africa. This Church stayed strong in Antioch, Constantinople and Palestine. It was called Melkite by the other Christian traditions as an accusation, because these Christians supported the *Melik* (King) of Byzantium. Fr. George Atiyyeh, a Greek Orthodox priest from Beirut, in explaining the relations between the Church and the *Rūmī* (Byzantine) empire concludes:

> we can say that those who kept being called Rūm (the Arabic/Islamic title of the Melkites) until now are of all ethnic peoples of the Rūmī church who accepted the seven ecumenical councils along with other aspects of the Rūmī heritage. As for the name Melkites (royal), which came to be used some time ago, it was not one the Rūm chose for themselves, but rather one that members of Non-Chalcedonian churches called them by because they had, in their view, followed the king (emperor). In fact, those who accepted the Ecumenical Councils had not, in doing so, followed the kings of the Rūmī Empire, but the saints of the Rūmī church. Those saints often struggled, and were subjected to banishment and torture that led at times to martyrdom. It is therefore apparent that the Rūmī church was not one of the old churches that became independent after the fifth century, retaining a special heritage that belong to one particular people and one particular language. The Rūmī church, rather, is

[125] Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, 184-192; Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 224-255 gives an excellent introduction of those monasteries spread in Syria and Mesopotamia, presenting their history, theological affiliation and role in the Christian history of the area. On pages 316-353, Vööbus discusses more deeply the Ascetic stylists and monasteries, their role in the life of the church, the people, especially the Arab tribes in the area, and their missionary work; S. Rubenson, "Asceticism and Monasticism" 655-658; Norris claims that Simeon the Stylite was Chalcedonian, see Norris, "Greek Christianities", 99.

> the first catholic church of the first century; it arose after the apostles and evangelized all the countries and ethnic peoples of the Rūmī (or Roman) Empire.[126]

For the Chalcedonians, the true and orthodox church is founded on Jesus Christ and the apostles' teachings as it was confirmed in the seven ecumenical councils. For them, the historical, national and political factors had nothing to do with the formation of the three types of 'orthodoxy' in the first six centuries of Christian history in the Middle East.

The Chalcedonian Church in the East played a great role in the area, particularly in Palestine, which stayed almost unified in following the Chalcedonian heritage. The influence of imperial power on Palestine started when Helen and Constantine built the great Christian churches in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The monasteries, again, played a big role in this unity, especially after Jerusalem was acknowledged as Patriarchate in Chalcedon. In fact, the Palestinian monasteries, in the Judean desert, such as Mar Saba, were not at first in agreement with Chalcedon because the Palestinian monastic movement was under Egyptian influence for a long time. After Chalcedon, the newly appointed Chalcedonian Patriarch in Jerusalem, Juvenalis, was deposed by the anti-Chalcedonians in Palestine, and an anti-Chalcedonian patriarch was elected instead. After a year, and under imperial pressures, the monasteries in and around Jerusalem decided to accept Chalcedon, and Juvenalis was restored to his position.[127] It was one of the Chalcedon canons and achievements to put all monks and monasteries under the Patriarchal authorities because they realized the great impact of those organizations on the life and faith of the people and churches.[128]

Struggle over doctrines and faith in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine was the main history-making force in these areas during the first six centuries of Christianity. It was also the main force that had driven the churches to form their own unique 'orthodoxy'.

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[126] Fr. George Atiyyeh, "The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage (5th to 8th century): Churches of the Byzantine Tradition" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East.* ed. by Habib Badr & others (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 297; The article discusses other aspects and history of the Chalcedonian Church.

[127] S. Rubenson, "Asceticism and Monasticism", 652-655; David Brakke also answers the question: why did Jerusalem, or the Palestinian Church, embrace the Chalcedonian position?, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 357.

[128] Ibid. 663.

Heretical movements and concepts were the spark that led to the councils. In the councils, bishops came with their own backgrounds, theologies, philosophies, terminologies, languages, national and personal ambitions. Those contextual factors played a big role in the results. Over them all was a pressing political context; the Roman imperial ambition was to keep the unity of the empire by securing the unity of the church, while in Mesopotamia the Persian Church struggled to keep itself distant from political labeling with Byzantium, the natural enemy of Persia.

Theological and Christological emphases in the different areas cannot be ignored; they played a great role in forming the Christological formulas of the Alexandrian and Antiochian Schools. Alexandria was more concerned with proving and explaining the unity/oneness of the incarnated Logos, while Antioch emphasized the two natures of Christ as fully divine and fully human. The terminology developed in this process was different, which led to clashes between the different parties. There is no doubt that all parties were sincere and faithful to their tradition and faith, all were struggling to keep the faith handed over to them from the apostles (all the sees claim direct apostolic connection as we have seen in the first part of this chapter), and all were eager to defend the faith against the heretical movements and concepts that had started to flourish after Constantine embraced Christianity and ended the persecution of the Christians. Some scholars today affirm the fact that what divided the churches and separated them was 'difference in terminology'.[129] The call for reconciliation and rediscovering the different meanings of the terminology that was used in the Councils and caused schism was made by a Chalcedonian theologian who was affected by emperors Zeno's and Justinian's proposals of unity. Leontius of Jerusalem argued against the anti-Chalcedonians, trying to convince them to discover the deep meaning under the surface of the different words that caused the Christological schisms. He was trying to convince the Monophysites that the Chalcedon formula said the same as they did if in different terms. Unfortunately, his proposals were

[129] Uthemann, "History of Christology", 492.

rejected. He was accused in the West of being anti-Chalcedonian after the failure of the emperor's Christological proposal.[130]

**Summary**

Christological debate and schism shaped Christian history and reality in the Middle East till the coming of Islam. Political struggles within the Byzantine Empire and with the Persians affected the Church in such a way that it developed not one, but several unique identities. The political struggle over the issue of primacy among the different Christian patriarchal sees further pushed this formation of identities. The 'primacy conflict' was a consequence of growing national spirit among Christian nations. This spirit was reflected in the languages used to write liturgies and theologies in the monasteries. The contribution of the monasteries in different areas cannot be ignored. They had a theological, social and clerical impact on the Churches. In some areas, the patriarchs and bishops were exclusively monks. It is possible too that the rigid and tough environments those monks lived in influenced their flexibility toward new concepts and terminology. The situation in the East at the eve of Islam was of a divided church with divided loyalties, oppressed religious and national groups, and two great powers, Byzantium and Persia, already tired of the continuous fighting between them. At this stage of history, a new nation was about to be born looking for its own national and cultural identity in Arabia.

[130] Leontius of Jerusalem. *Against the Monophysites: Testimonies of the Saints and Aporiae*. Edited and translated by Patrick T. Gray in *Oxford Early Christian Texts*, edited by Henry Chadwick (NY: Oxford University Press Inc, 2006), 15-20.

# Chapter Two: Christianity in Arabia in Pre-Islamic Times and its influence on Islam

The previous chapter examined how three distinct Christian identities were formed in their own socio-political and cultural contexts of the East. This chapter will explore how these three Churches and what was labeled as 'heresy', influenced the Arabs before Islam, and how this influence, if any, made an impact on Islam itself, and on its image of Christianity in particular, once Islam arrived in the region. Consideration of this question is important because the Qur'an, the source of Islamic thought, law and spirituality, presents itself as the continuation and fulfillment of both Christianity and Judaism. Muhammad saw himself as belonging to the same prophetic line and tradition of the Bible in its two testaments (i.e. Q.2: 41, 91, 97; 3:3; 4:44-49 and many others).[131] However, Islam was influenced by some non-orthodox 'Christian' groups that were found in Arabia. This influence is clear at the foundational level in the doctrinal and practices' conflict between Islam and Christianity. I will argue to prove this influence; some modern Muslim scholars have started to admit it after long Islamic denial.

## The sources of Islamic Theology and History

The five main sources of Islamic Theology and History are loaded with stories from the Christian (Judaic) tradition. These five main sources are first, the Qur'an and the *Hadith*[132] as the major two sources of Islamic law. Then comes the *Sira*[133] tradition, the *Tafsir*[134] tradition and finally the Muslim historiographies that depict the life and mission of

[131] All texts from the Qur'an cited in this work are taken from Muhammad T. Al-Hilali & Muhammad M. Khan (eds) *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language* (Madinah (K.S.A): King Fahed Complex for the printing of the Holy Qur'an, 1417 AH).
[132] Reports of Muhammad's sayings and actions taken as life normative principles and binding teachings by the Muslims.
[133] Muhammad's biography.
[134] Qur'an commentaries.

Muhammad as part of world history from Adam till the time of the Caliph in whose lifetime that history was written.[135]

These sources and the 'Christian/Judaic' material they include raise a challenge to be studied in this chapter. It seems that not all of this material is taken from 'orthodox' Christian sources, and we will see how the Qur'an and other Muslim sources adopted apocryphal Christian material or responded to their dogmas. The usage of 'Orthodox' and 'heterodox' material showed the confusion in the Islamic tradition. This perplexity in the Islamic sources, the Qur'an in particular, has led Western Oriental scholars such as Nöldeke and others to suggest that the Qur'an was influenced by non-orthodox Christian sources and theology. Many Muslim scholars responded negatively to these Western Oriental studies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Muslim scholars' attitude toward these studies was full of suspicion and distrust. They saw in the Western studies a prologue to evangelization and colonization of the Muslim World. Some linked these studies to a new Crusade against the Muslim World.[136] Although the attitude toward the oriental studies is still the same in the Muslim writings, the attitude toward applying a historical critical approach in studying the Islamic main sources is facilitating a change of direction among some Muslim scholars as we will see later in this chapter.

The concept of the Qur'an using 'non-orthodox' resources is neither a recent nor a western invention. Christian-Muslim theological dialogue concerning this issue was started in the seventh and eighth centuries by prominent Christian theologians from the East such as

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[135] Jason Dean, "Outbidding Catholicity; Islamic attitudes toward Christians and Christianity" in *Exchange* 38 (2009) 201-225, is discussing the three main sources only: The Qur'an, Hadith and Sira. Then he analyzes and presents how these sources present five types of Islamic attitudes toward Christians and Christianity as: "1) Affirmation of the truth of the Gospel, 2) descriptions of Christians as true believers, 3) descriptions of Christians as sectarians, 4) accusations of disbelief (*Kufr)* and 5) accusations of idolatry (*Shirk*)".

[136] See for example Irfan Omar (ed.), A *Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 50-57; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 147-149; Muhammad al-Bahi, A*l-Mubashshirun wa'l-Mustashriqun wa-Mawqifahum min al-Islam* (The Evangelists and Orientlists and their Attitudes toward Islam) (Cairo: Al-Azhar University Press, 1962) & *Al-Islam wa Muwajahet al-Mathahib al-Hadamah* (Islam Facing the Destructive Ideologies) (Cairo: Maktabit Wahba, 1981), 30-33; Abd al-Rahman al-Maidani, *Ajnihat al-Makr Thlatha: al-Tabshir- al-Istishrak- al-Isti'amar* (The Three Wings of Deceit: Evangelism-Orientalism-Colonialism) (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 8th edition, 2000); Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism" in *The New York Review of Books*, June 1982 responds to these charges.

John of Damascus, Theodore abu Qurrah, ‘Amar al-Basri and others. Some of these theologians and their writings in the Umayyad period will be covered and discussed in Chapter Three.[137]

The main objective of this chapter is to set the context of the later dialogue and relations among Christians and Muslims. I will attempt to show that dialogue between Christians and Muslims has often proceeded from different assumptions about what the Christian theological position consists of. I hope to show further that the accusations the Qur’an levels against Christianity are drawn from sources judged heretical by Orthodox Christian traditions at earlier times.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the age of evangelization and oriental studies prompted widespread interest in Islam and its relation to Christianity, Western scholars explored the influence of non-orthodox Christian sources on Islam in the light of new archeological and textual discoveries. German scholars such as Theodore Nöldeke were the pioneers in this field. In his book *The History of the Qur’an* published in German (*Geschichte des Qorans*1898 and 1909) and in Arabic (2004), Nöldeke affirms the Christian-Judaic influence in the Qur’an, which came as a result of the widespread Christian presence in Arabia. Nöldeke says that “Islam is the ‘Christian formula’ of Arabia”. In other words, Islam adopted certain ‘Christian’ teachings and formulated its distinctive dogmatic identity regarding the belief in God and His apostles around them. We can know this by comparing the text of the Qur’an with the apocryphal Christian writings that were probably transmitted to Arabia orally or through some liturgical and story-telling sources during the age of conflicts among Christians in the first Christian centuries. The Qur’an is influenced by these writings in form, recitation and content.[138] Nöldeke’s work is still a leading authority in Qur’anic studies. He was able to differentiate between the

[137] Sidney H. Griffith, “The Prophet Muhammad: His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century” in *The Life of Muhammad* edited by Uri Rubin (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1998), 345-392; Sidney H. Griffith *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Both works are a good and extensive introduction to these writers and the time they lived and wrote in.
[138] Theodore Nöldeke, *Tarikeh al-Qur’an* (The History of the Qur’an), trans. George Tamer (Auflage-Beirut: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2004) (Arabic), 7-9, 16.

Meccan and Medinian Suras and verses based on their content. He showed how the Meccan Suras reflect more spiritual direction because they were influenced by the Christian-Judaic presence in Mecca; the Medinian Suras on the other side reflect socio-political issues in Medina in order to satisfy the arising needs of the new community.[139]

Hans Küng presents and discusses extensively the German contribution to this field (from the likes of Nöldeke, Goldziher, Adolf von Harnack, Schoeps). He aims in his recent book to open dialogue with Muslims and the other two Abrahamic religions, affirming the Christian influence on Islam, its text and practices by providing a historical sketch of Jewish-Christianity.[140] He does not question the originality of the revelations of Muhammad, rather, he contends that the "analogies between the Qur'anic picture of Jesus and a Christology with a Jewish-Christian stamp are perplexing".[141] Küng is careful, however, to remain open for dialogue in these modern times.

Bishop Kenneth Cragg takes another direction in his writings. Although he does not deny the Jewish-Christian influence among the Arabs, his primary interest is in the reasons why Arabs of Arabia chose not to adopt the 'orthodox' Christian faith but instead became "a fertile ground of heresies" [142] and began their own prophetic movement. A movement was started in second century Arabia by Elkasai, described as:

> A figure of evident charisma and personal force [who] was delivered of oracles and messages for which he claimed direct mediation, as a book from heaven via the angels in original Aramaic. All was in the name of 'the most high God' and with the warning refrain 'I am witness over you in the day of the great judgment,'….The collection of 'the book' exercised a total command over its disciples. Believers turned to Jerusalem in prayer, practiced circumcision, observed the Sabbath, and used bread and salt in an exclusive table fellowship or sacrament.[143]

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[139] Ibid., 53-60.
[140] Hans Küng. *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2007), 59-76.
[141] Ibid., 37- 44.
[142] Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 37-38.
[143] Ibid.

For Cragg, this ethos of Jewish-Christianity had more appeal among the Arabs who saw in Islam, and in the earlier 'heretical' movements, a re-Semiticization of Jesus as the prophet of God by refusing all the Greek philosophical Christian divinization of Christ. This made for a dogmatic, rather than political, starting point in the Christian-Muslim struggle. Although the Islamic concept of *Tawhid* [144] is derived from Christianity and Judaism and led to the monotheistic trend of the Haniffyya movement among the Arabs, generally Islam used orthodox Christian teachings and mixed them with a range of 'heretical' teachings. The emergence of Islam was a reaction to a deviant and divided Christianity and to the rejection of Hellenistic theology combined with the development of an Arab 'national' sense of unity,[145] or at least the need for that unity.

By shifting the focus from how Christianity influenced the Qur'an to why Islam and the Arabs adopted the Semitic not the Hellenistic views of divine incarnation and high Christology, Cragg sought to present a fair and balanced view of Islamic dogmas concerning Jesus within their historical setting. Islam, for Cragg, was adopting what was already in its religious and social context rather than adopting Hellenistic philosophy.

M.W. Watt agrees that the Christianity in Mecca in pre-Islamic times was not part of the 'Great Church', but he contends that we have little knowledge of what type of Christianity there was in Mecca before Islam. He points out that there was no Arabic translation of the Bible at the time, and the reports about some Christians in Mecca prior to the advent of Islam make no mention of groups of Christian scholars. For Watt these reports make the knowledge of Christian faith among the Arabs of little influence. While he doubts the influence of Jewish-Christianity on Arabia, he proposes that the main influence on Arabs may be Nestorian or Monophysite due to the Meccan trade with Syria, Gaza, Yemen and Abyssinia where these two Christian traditions were growing. Watt believes that the

[144] The belief in the oneness of God.
[145] Ibid. Cragg discusses these issues extensively in Chapters 1 and 2. He also has another specialized book on Jesus in the eyes of Muslims; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1985).

insignificant influence of Christianity on Arabia is due to its temporary residence in Mecca for trade.[146]

I strongly agree, however, with the scholars who believe that Christianity had influence on Arabia and Islam. I think that Watt's opinion downplays the importance of oral tradition that transmitted Christian and Jewish religious beliefs among Arabs. The lack of information about any Arabic translation of the Bible or the presence of Arab Christian scholars in Mecca does not indicate a lack of Christian influence in Arabia, for several reasons. First, the Arabs travelled for trade and exploration, especially the nomads among them, and this travel exposed them to many different kinds of influence. The major lands around them were Syria, Mesopotamia and Yemen, where the Christian influence was great. Second, merchants and slaves were instrumental in spreading their faith among the people. Some reports talk about a Yemeni merchant who brought Christianity first to Yemen from *al-Hira* and then Christianity spread in Arabia.[147] Third, the influence of wandering ascetics and the established monasteries on the edges of Arabia was great on Arabia. The reports tell about a Syrian Jacobite ascetic, Phemion, who introduced Christianity in Najran around the year 500 AD.[148] If the Christians were not influential in Arabia on the eve of Islam, why was it important for Muhammad's biographer to indicate in his writings the presence of Christians in Mecca?[149]

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[146] William M. Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London/NY: Routledge, 1991), 6-7. Watt in another article discusses the "Reliability of Ibn Ishaq's Sources" published in W.M. Watt, *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 13-23, in which he talks about the late sources of Ibn Ishaq as Muhammad's biographer; J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), 259 agrees with Watt. There are some other western scholars who discussed the Christian influence on the Qur'an and Islam such as Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures in Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1968) can be used as a general introduction; also Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the time of Muhammad till the 14th Century* (NY: Howard Ferting, 1967) (1st published in 1933).

[147] Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia. Beginnings-1500*. Vol. I (NY: Harper Collins Publications, 1992), 275. Al-Hira is a city located in the south of Iraq.

[148] Ibid., 277.

[149] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*. (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967), 90-107.

The Qur'an[150] and its images and discussions of Christians and Christian doctrines will be the main focus of the remainder of this Chapter. It is, after all, the key source of Muslim belief and for subsequent Islamic writings, especially the *Hadith*[151] and historical writings.

## Christianity in Arabia before Islam

Before getting into this task, it is important to present a brief account of the Christian presence among Arabs and their Christian affiliation in and around Arabia before the arrival of Islam. The Arab presence was not confined to Arabian borders, which are difficult to define. There were several Arab tribes who lived in today's Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Sinai/Egypt. The word "Arab" appeared for the first time in Assyrian inscriptions describing the nomads who inhabited the steppes of Syria to the west of the Euphrates, and who were encountered by the Assyrians.[152] Arab religions were diverse according to their inhabitation and the culture they settled in. Among them were polytheists, monotheists, those who believe in divination and magic, Manicheans, Jews and Christians.[153]

Most of the Arab tribes in northern parts of Arabia accepted the Christian faith and embraced it, especially the Ghassanid Arabs in Syria who were Jacobites, and the Lakhmid

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[150] For more specialized introduction on the Qur'an, its text and formation see Fred M. Donner, "The Historical Context", Claude Gilliot, "Creation of a Fixed Text" and Harald Motzki, "Alternative Accounts of the Qur'an's Formation" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Küng, *Islam*, 59-75.

[151] Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Beirut: Khayats Book and Publishing Co., 1966), 132-149.

[152] Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 1-6; Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) (Revised 10th Edition) presents an extensive and detailed study on the Arabs and their history and relations before Islam, especially the first 7 chapters; Jan Retsö. *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their history from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London & NY: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 600-601; Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10-17.

[153] For the religions of the Arabs before Islam see G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Yehuda Nevo & Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: The origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), especially part III; Retsö, *The Arabs*, 600-626; Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, 15-17; Robert Hoyland. *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London & NY: Routledge, 2001), 139-166; Jonathan Berkey. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (NY: Cambridge Uni. Press, 2003), 10-38.

Arabs in *al-Hira* of Iraq who adopted Nestorianism. They were also affiliated politically with the two world powers of the time, namely the Byzantine and the Persian Empires.

Christianity had arrived in the heart of Arabia – in Najran to the north of Yemen – by the fourth century. Christians[154] also spread in Yemen, influenced by the Ethiopian Monophysite church that was itself under the religious influence and leadership of the Coptic Monophysite church of Egypt.[155] Two particular factors encouraged the Arabs to convert to Christianity: the work of monks; and the 'heterodox and their missionary zeal'.[156] It is doubtful that Arabs became Christians for political benefits given that most of them were affiliated to Christian churches other than the imperial church and were subjected to persecution.[157] There is also evidence of Christian presence along the east coast of Arabia where documents and archeological sites of churches have been discovered in Qatar and the Emirates. This area was under the leadership of the Nestorian patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.[158]

There is not much documentary or other evidence of the type of Christianity among Arabs in the towns or in the areas where Islam was born, namely in Mecca and Yathrb

[154] And Jews with Persian support.
[155] David Thomas, "Arab Christianity" in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, edited by Ken Parry (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1-5; Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 19-26; Trimingham, *Christianity among Arabs*, presents a full account of Arab Christians and their religious affiliation in Ch. 5; Samuel Moffett, A *History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings-1500 AD.* Vol. I (NY: Harper Collins Publications, 1992), 273-284.
[156] F. E. Peters, "Introduction" in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* edited by F. E. Peters (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), xxv-xxvi.
[157] Trimingham, *Christianity among Arab*,162-169 reports how the Byzantine emperors persecuted the followers of the Monophysite church followers. Nestorians were not under attack due to their presence under the Persian rule. The interesting fact is that the Byzantine emperor Justinian accepted the request of the Ghassanid Emir Harith ibn Jabala that two Monophysite bishops were ordained by the exiled Coptic Monophysite Patriarch in Byzantium in order to serve among Arabs in 542 which shows that Byzantium was in need for the Arabs to protect the empire from the Persians at that time.
[158] There is an interesting and important archaeological study done by a scholar from Durham University in UK about the Christian presence in the Gulf area which shows the influence of the Church of the East in Qatar, the Arab Emirates and others. This presence was still active till the middle of the 8th Cent. See R.A. Cater, "Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam" in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 19 (2008): 71-108. The first Christian archaeological site was opened for the public in UAE was launched in Dec. 2010, http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/uae-s-first-christian-archaeological-site-opens-2010-12-11-1.327810; Peter Hellyer, "Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia" in *Journal of Social Affairs* 18 (2001): 79-99.

(Medina).[159] This has led many scholars, both Western and Eastern, to launch extensive studies on the type of Christianity that is likely to have spread there and shaped the conceptions of Christianity that are evident in the Qur'an[160], in the Sira tradition and in the Arab poetry tradition of *al-Jahiliyya.*[161] In my judgment the existence of Christian concepts in these resources gives good historical indication of the presence of Christianity and Judaism in this area of Arabia.[162] The questions of interest are then: what was the language of worship those Christian Arabs used before Islam? Did they have the Bible or some biblical fragments in Arabic? How did they convert to Christianity and what language was used to nurture their new faith?

It seems that the Arabs were greatly influenced by a far more developed civilization than their own at the time. Syriac Christian civilization expanded from Palestine through Syria, Jordan, and Iraq and penetrated Arabia. This is evident as Christianity spread among the Arab tribes of the North such as *Kinda, Rabi'a* and *Thagleb,*[163] in addition to the spread of Christianity in Najran.[164]

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[159] See F. E. Peters, "Introduction" in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* edited by F. E. Peters (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), xxx- xlix where Peters introduces the main pre-Islamic information about Mecca, its trade and religions. It seems that there is no record of Mecca in the Pre-Islamic resources and Mecca is reported in the later works. Therefore, all the information about Mecca comes from post-Islamic resources. I think that the poetry of pre-Islamic era gives some information about Mecca and the Arabs in pre-Islamic times; a source cannot be neglected as poetry is known as '*Arabs Diwan* (Registry/record)'.

[160] The legitimate question would be: If there was no Christianity in Mecca, where did the Qur'an get its information from?

[161] A term used to describe the pre-Islamic times of ignorance in comparison to Islam that brought the knowledge of God to Arabs.

[162] Just to mention some studies on the topic: Sidney Smith, "Events in Arabia in the 6th Century AD" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 16/3 (1954): 425-468 mentions some inscriptions in Yemen related to people had to do with Mecca before Islam, P.437-441 ; Eric R. Wolf "The Social Organization of Mecca and the Origins of Islam" in *South Western Journal of Anthropology* 7/4 (1951): 329-356; P. M. Holt, Ann Lambton, & B. Lewis (eds). *The Cambridge History of Islam: The Central Islamic Lands*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 3-29.

[163] Trimingham, *Christianity among Arabs*, 175-182, 277-279.

[164] There are two conflicting traditions concerning who brought Christianity to Najran. One tradition reports that Jacobite Syrian ascetic (then supported by the Abyssinians) were the founders of Christianity in this area and the other tradition said that Nestorians, due to the Persian influence, founded Christianity in the area. See Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 38; Jawad Ali. *Al-Mufasal fi Tarikh al-'Arab qabla al-Islam* (The Detailed History of Arabs before Islam), Vol. 6. (Baghdad: Baghdad University, 1993), 608-620. (Arabic); Trimingham, *Christianity among Arabs*, 294-295.

Some historians call those Arab Christian tribes the *'Syrianized Arabs'* because the Syrian language was dominant in the area – a language of trade as much as it was a Christian language. Trade was an important feature of the lives of Arabs living in urban towns such as Mecca and Yathreb before Islam.[165] Trade convoys and merchants were means of cultural and religious influence. Muhammad himself [before prophethood] was part of at least two trade trips to Syria where he met the Christian Monk Bahira who predicted Muhammad's prophethood. He also became responsible for the trade engaged in by his Christian wife to be, Khadija bintu Khwiled.[166] These trips were opportunities for the merchants to meet with some monks who were scattered along the way to Syria.

Cragg contends that the (Syrian) Christians' failure to preach the gospel to the Arabs in their own native language contributed to the adoption by Muhammad and by Islam of a conception of Christianity shaped by that found in Mecca at that time. On that knowledge the Qur'an built its image and understanding of Christianity and Christian doctrines. Cragg suggests three reasons for this failure: first, the Christian inability to balance between the right of the believers to stand up and fight (*Jihad*) for their rights in a harsh context, and the 'will to sacrifice' and forgive as a fundamental Christian teaching; second, the philosophical rigidity of Christianity's doctrines and its abstract ideas; and third, the failure to establish Christianity in a 'national' Arab sense and language. These issues were addressed in Islam as the religion of Arabs who are allowed by divine order to fight for their rights in sacred jihad, and in a text full of images and stories in the Arabs' own tongue![167] I agree with Cragg's argument partially because one cannot downplay totally the Syriac cultural influence on the Qur'an and on Islam as a whole, however; it was domesticated and adapted into the new religious system and social practices. One of these

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[165] Suha Rassem, *Christianity in Iraq: Its Origins and Development to the Present Day* (Victoria: Freedom Publishing, 2010), 14-16; Trimingham, *Christianity among Arabs*, 7 affirms this fact.
[166] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 79-84; Sidney Smith, "Events in Arabia", 425-429 about trade of Mecca; Eric Wolf, "The Social organization in Mecca", 330-337. These sources show how trade was the main source of living in Mecca and without it Mecca would perish. This is how Muhammad after his immigration to Medina was able to defeat the Meccan tribes, by cutting off their trade routes.
[167] Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 32-34.

practices is reciting the Qur'an in the way the Syriac churches do their liturgies following almost the same rhythm and music.[168]

The Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, was revealed to the prophet Muhammad in two places – Mecca at the beginning of his mission and al-Medina where Muhammad established himself as a religious and socio-political leader. Qur'anic studies show a progressive understanding of Christianity (and Judaism) in the two places over 23 years of revelation (610-632 AD).[169] Muhammad in the Meccan period reflected good knowledge of the Torah including its main figures and stories such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron; he then developed more awareness of the Jewish people when he came into contact with the Jewish tribes in Medina. It is noted that the Qur'an keeps using the Torah's title *Banu Israel* [170] in the Meccan suras, and started using the name 'Jews' while in Medina. This usage reflects his growing understanding of the socio-political reality of the Jewish people.[171] Studies show also the progression of Islamic understanding and attitudes toward Christians and Christianity in the other Muslim sources of *Hadith*, *Sira*, and later historical writings.[172]

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[168] Cristoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007), 70-72; There is an interesting exercise on how a Qur'anic Sura is based on an ancient Christian hymn by Munther Younes, "Charging Steeds or Maidens Doing Good Deeds? A Re-Interpretation of Qur'an 100 (al-'adiyat)" in *Arabica* 55 (2008): 362-386.

[169] Theodore Nöldeke, *History of the Qur'an* (AR) 29-52, 53-60 are just examples about this issue. In fact the whole book is trying to re-construct the Qur'an revelations; A more recent study is done by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[170] Children of Israel.

[171] Gaudeul, Jean-Marie. *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History.* Vol. I. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e Islamici, 1990), 8-9.

[172] Jason Dean, "Outbidding Catholicity: Early Islamic Attitudes toward Christians and Christianity" in *Exchange* 38 (2009): 201-225 provides a thorough study of the three main sources, the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sira tradition, where he has provided several charts and tables to show this progressive process; Examples on this understanding see how al-Tabari presents the story of Jesus and Mary in Moshe Perlmann (trans. & annot.), *The History of Al-Tabari: The Ancient Kingdoms*. Vol. IV. (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1987), 112-125; Also, the collection of *Hadith* in Tarif Khalidi (ed. & trans.), *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harverd University Press, 2001).

## Christians in the Qur'an

The image of Christians, Christ and other Christian-related issues in the Qur'an can be divided into three main categories. These will help us to locate the type of Christianity that made an impact on the Qur'an and eventually on Islam as a religion.

### 1. The Christians (*al-Nasara*)

The Qur'an never calls the Christians *Masihyyun* (from Messiah or Masieh) as they are known today in the Middle East. The alternative name is *al-Nasara*. Why did the Qur'an and Muslim sources adopt this title? How did it become known to Muhammad?

The term is used fourteen times in the Qur'an, and most of the Qur'an commentators link it to Nazareth because Jesus was 'Jesus of Nazareth'. According to Acts 24:5 the Jews referred to the followers of Christ as 'Nazarenes'; they were called 'Christians' in 11:26 in the Hellenistic environment. This distinction was preserved when later writings and sources addressed the Jewish Christians as Nazarenes.[173] Beginning in the fourth century, this designation appears in early Christian writings to designate heretical groups, especially those who believed in Jesus Christ as the son of God and kept the Law of Moses (Eusebius, Epiphanius). The term was also associated with the Ebionites and Elkhesaites who denied the divinity of Christ and regarded as authoritative the apocryphal Gospel to the Hebrews.[174] De Blois says:

> The possibility that the *nasara* of the Qur'an were not catholic Christians, but Nazoraean 'Jewish-Christians', is suggested not only by their Arabic name, but also by what the Qur'an has to say about Christians.[175]

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[173] Fiey, J.M., "Naṣārā" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.* Edited by: P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. 15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0848.

[174] Francois de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Hanīf (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65/1(2002): 1-16 is an extensive study of the term and its usage in the early Christian writings, and of how Muslims used it; Küng, *Islam*, 37-44.

[175] Ibid., 13.

De Blois supports his argument with two observations about the Qur'an's misunderstanding of Christianity. He first adduces the Qur'anic rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity (4:171; 5:73, 75, 116; 72:3). It is clear that the Qur'anic conception of the Trinity as father, mother and son based on a supposed physical relationship between God and Mary is mistaken and that it adopted this 'wrong' conception from these 'heretical' groups.[176] This is evident in the apocryphal Gospel to the Hebrews where the Holy Spirit is described as Jesus' mother. The second observation concerns the Qur'anic food regulations (5:5). The similarities between the teachings of the Qur'an and those of the Ebionites concerning certain kinds of food, such as forbidding the eating of pork (following the Mosaic Law that was adopted by the Ebionites), made the Qur'an to allow Muslims to eat from the food of al-*Nasara* and to marry their daughters.

There are endless studies on Jewish Christianity and its different sects such as the Nazoraeans, the Ebionites, and the Elkhesaites. The studies report that their scriptures were the apocryphal gospels of Matthew, the Gospel to the Hebrews, the Gospel to the Nazoraeans and the Gospel of the Ebionites.[177] These groups agreed on certain doctrines: a conception of the Oneness of God that denied any notion of trinity; the denial of Jesus' divinity; his 'adoption' as the prophet of God; and his identity as a created human being as others. Some of them also denied the virgin birth. They recognized the Law of Moses (Torah) and its main figures only, and they followed a strict purification system. They rejected Paul and his teachings and accused him of corrupting the original Christianity.[178]

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[176] Ibid., 13-16; For a study on the Trinity in Islam see David Thomas, "Trinity" in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2011. Brill Online.15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_SIM-00428.

[177] See A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 27-43; Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (p. p 99-103) & *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not Make it into the New Testament* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[178] The following studies introduce them well: Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*; Oskar Skarsaune, "The Ebionites" & Wolfram Kinzig, "The Nazoraeans" in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The early Centuries* edited by Oskar Skarsaune & Reider Hvalvik (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2007), 419-462, 463-487; Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (NY: HarperOne, 2009), 105-111; John Arendzen, "Ebionites" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. (NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1909) , retrieved on 19 Nov. 2010 http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05242c.htm; H.J. Schopes, "Ebionite Christianity" in *Early Christianity and Judaism* edited by Everett Ferguson (NY & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 125-130.

Alister McGrath finds that Arianism and Ebionitism have essentially the same view of Jesus, but they had different starting points determined by two different cultures. While both affirm that Jesus was human and a creature of God rather than God's Son, Arius affirmed his view of Jesus' humanity as supreme creature in a Greek philosophical setting. "Arianism insists that Christ is to be seen as a human being on account of a philosophical commitment to the absolute unity of God," while Ebionitism saw Jesus as a mere prophet in line with the Jewish model and setting.[179] McGrath's remark is significant because the environment in which Islam was born was a Semitic setting where the acceptance of Jesus' prophethood and not his divinity was an easier option than Christian doctrines that assert the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. These doctrines were formulated in the Hellenistic world with Hellenistic terminology and then were accepted by it.

How does the Qur'an describe the 'Christian *Nasara'* in the light of these historical facts?

The Qur'an describes the Christians as the nearest in love to the Muslim believers and identifies: among them humble priests and monks (5:82); they listen to the Qur'an with reverence and awe (5:83); God put in their hearts compassion and mercy (57:27); Muhammad had to ask them when in doubt about the revelation he received (10:94). This raises the question whether Christians were present in Mecca and Medina and were available for this task. The Qur'an even reflects sympathy and support toward the Christian Byzantine empire in its war with the heathen Persian empire (c.614 AD). This sympathy is found in one of the Meccan suras called *al-Rum*, a name that is still used of the Greek Orthodox Church:

> The Romans [al-Rum] have been defeated. In the nearest land, and they, after their defeat, will be victorious. Within three to nine years. The decision of the matter, before and after is only with Allah. And on that day, the believers [Muslims] will rejoice. (30:2-4)

However, the Qur'an reflects in its later stages some awareness of Christian factions (3:69-72), without naming them. It differentiates between the true Christian believers (*al-*

[179] McGrath, *Heresy*, 109, 145.

*Nasara*, the nearest in love to Muslims 5:82) and those who exceed/exaggerate the limits of religion by saying things against the truth (5:77). The Christians and Jews are referred to thirty times in the Qur'an as *Ahl al-Kitab* (The people of the book). It is an endorsement of their relation to Muslims who have received the final book from God through the revelation to Muhammad. The Qur'an uses *Ahl al-Kitab* to recognize a 'just/common word' between them and the Muslims (3:64).[180] This 'Just Word' is to "Worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with him and that none of us shall take others as lords beside Allah. Then, if *Ahl al-Kitab* turn away [from these demands], say [Muslims to *Ahl al-Kitab*]: 'bear witness that we are Muslims" (3:64). The intensity of this verse shows the awareness in the Qur'an of some people of the book who may not agree with this 'just/common word', which emphasizes the Oneness of God. The result of this accusation is twofold. First, the Qur'anic decision identified Islam as the *Din of Ibrahim* (Religion of Abraham) who "was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim *Hanif*" (3:67), so Islam is now distinct, and is the final and true religion (3:19, 85; 5:3; 9:74). Secondly, the Qur'an calls the people of the book to accept its truth, rebuking them for corrupting their own scriptures and diverging from the truth of the former prophets of God, saying that Muhammad was sent to revive and recover the authentic message (3:71-86).

The term *Hanif* is very important as Islam is called the *Haniffyya.* In Muslim understanding and terminology, *Hanif* means a strict monotheist who refused the polytheist worship in Arabia and devoted himself to Allah, the Supreme God of Arabia.[181] Abraham and his son Ishmael are considered to be the first *Hanifs.* They built the Ka'ba to make it a place of worship to the One God. Muhammad is believed to be a descendent from the *Hanifi* family, maybe to show that he comes from a pure monotheistic line.[182]

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[180] Vajda, G., "Ahlal-Kitāb" *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.* Edited by: P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. 15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-0383 . This article presents also the Hadith tradition concerning *Ahl al-Kitab*.

[181] M. W. Watt, "Belief in a 'High God' in Pre-Islamic Mecca" in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* edited by F. E. Peters (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), 307-312 argues that Allah was considered the high God and Creator by Arabs, and other deities were only His peers or partners, interceding on behalf of their worshippers.

[182] Uri Rubin, "Hanifiyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Din Ibrahim" in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* edited by F. E. Peters (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999),

The original meaning of *Hanif* is disputed, however. While al-Tabari provides five different meanings to it, all refer to Islamic usages such as 'pilgrim,' 'obedient,' and an alternate word for Islam itself. The word in Syriac language and in the Christian writings, *hanpa*, means pagan or non-Christian. Other Muslim writers used *Hanif* to describe the 'star worshippers'. al-Mas'udi (a Muslim historian) admits that it was a Syriac word originally. It seems that this word was a Christian designation for all people who were neither Jews nor Christians. In Islam "the *hanifiyya* is contrasted both with polytheism and with the 'corrupted' monotheism of the Jews and Christians".[183] It is clear though that this trend of monotheism in Arabia was itself influenced by the Jewish and Christian presence. There is no trace of other monotheistic religions in Arabia at that time. It is worth noting the accusation leveled against Muhammad by the people of Mecca who said, "it is only a human being who teaches him [the monotheism]". The Qur'an's response to this accusation is "the tongue of the man [who is accused of teaching Muhammad the Monotheistic faith] they refer to is foreign, while this [the Qur'an] is a clear Arabic tongue" (16:103). According to the first and main *Tafsir* (commentary) books of the Qur'an, this accusation came as a result of Muhammad mixing with a Christian Byzantine (or Jewish) slave (or slaves) in Mecca who used to read their scriptures [in their original non-Arabic languages] while Muhammad was listening to them.[184] This accusation and the Qur'anic response raise the question of Muhammad's ability to understand other languages, and the possibility of having the Bible or fragments of it in Arabic language.

There are two modern Eastern Christian writers who have contributed to scholarly research on these issues. Their books are considered controversial and are banned in some Arab countries. The first is Fr. Yousef Haddad who argues that the Qur'an itself is a "Nazaritic

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267-294; Küng, *Islam* ,49; De Blois, *Nasrani and Hanif*, 17; For Muhammad's family see Ibn Ishaq, *Biography*, 66-79.

[183] Montgomery W. Watt, "Ḥanīf" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.* Edited by: P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis ; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. 15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0264; De Blois, *Nasrani and Hanif*, 18-21.

[184] See for example the commentaries Muqatel ben Sulieman, Al-Zamakhshari, al-Tabari (all in Arabic) in http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=0&tSoraNo=1&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=no&LanguageID=1.

Mission" or call (Da'wa دعوة).[185] This means for Haddad that Islam is taking the 'middle nation/way' (Qur'an 2:140-143) between Judaism, which rejected Jesus being the Christ, and the Christians who exceeded the limits (Qur'an 5:77) by believing in Jesus as the son of God and one of three (Qur'an 5:72-73).[186] For him Islam adopted the 'Jewish-Christian'/ Ebionite position because it was from the beginning a *Nazaritic* mission among the Arabs.[187] Haddad presents several historical, linguistic and dogmatic arguments to defend his position. He builds his argument on the presence of those Jewish-Christians in Mecca according to *al-Sira* tradition in addition to the witness of the Qur'an and other Muslim sources.[188]

There were in Mecca some men who refused the worship of idols that was popular in Mecca in the sixth-seventh centuries, and the Ka'ba was a center of this idolatry worship. They therefore decided to wander around looking for the true religion. Their search led some of them to become Christians and others to stay as monotheistic Hanifs. The most prominent figure among these people was Waraqa ben Nawfal, the cousin of Khadija, Muhammad's first wife. The biography of Muhammad written by Ibn Ishaq described them:

> Waraqa attached himself to Christianity [*Nasrania*] and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them. 'Ubaydullah [ibn Jahsh] went on searching until Islam came; then he migrated with the Muslims to Abyssinia [after being persecuted by polytheists in Mecca]….when he arrived there he adopted Christianity, parted from Islam and died a Christian…. 'Uthman ben al-Huywayrith went to Byzantine emperor and became a Christian. He was given high office there [some say he became a bishop]. Zayd ben 'Amr stayed as he was [a *hanif*]: he accepted

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[185] Yousef D. Haddad, *Al-Qur'an Da'wa Nasrania* (The Qur'an is Nazaritic Mission), 2 Vols. http://www.muhammadanism.org/haddad/nazaritic_mission/quran_nazaritic_mission_1.pdf & http://www.muhammadanism.org/haddad/nazaritic_mission/quran_nazaritic_mission_2.pdf. Accessed on 24/5/2011; Fr. Haddad has several books following the same line of thinking such as *Al-Injil fi al-Qur'an* (The Gospel in the Qur'an). http://www.muhammadanism.org/haddad/evangel_quran/evangel_in_quran.pdf . Accessed 19/11/2010; *Al-Qur'an wa al-Kitab: Bi'at al-Qur'an al-Kitabiah* (The Qur'an and the Book: The Biblical Environment of the Qur'an). http://www.muhammadanism.org/haddad/clerical_milieu_quran/clerical_milieu_quran.pdf .Accessed on 19/11/2010.

[186] Haddad, *Nazaritic Mission*, 29-30.

[187] Ibid., 35-39.

[188] Ibid., 90-117.

> neither Judaism nor Christianity. He abandoned the religion of his people and abstained from idols, animals that had died, blood, and things offered to idols….and he worshipped the God of Abraham.[189]

It is clear from this text that the major religious orientation in Mecca alongside the idol worship was either *Haniffyya* or Christian *Nasrani.* Although Zayed ben 'Amr did not become a Christian, the translator notes that he was following the teachings of the first Christian council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.[190] Moreover, Warqa and ibn al-Huywayrith are reported in *al-Ya'qubi* (died 284AH/897AD) *History* as belonging to the Christian Quraysh clan of Banu Assad ibn 'Abd al-'Uzza.[191] This indicates that Christianity was not only a religion of individuals but had spread among some tribes in Mecca. Waraqa was a Christian scholar who studied the scriptures, a theme repeated elsewhere in the biography.

Waraqa's relation to Muhammad went back to Muhammad's childhood. When Muhammad was lost as a child, Waraqa brought him back to his grandfather saying, "We have found this son of yours in the upper part of Mecca".[192] It seems that Muhammad was found among those who used to go to that part of Mecca to worship the one God, the habit Muhammad inherited when he used to go to the caves and where it was said that he received the first revelation. Were these people worshipping God in the caves when they discovered the little boy? It seems that these people who separated themselves from the idol worship in Mecca attracted Muhammad's attention from an early age. This attraction was embodied in Muhammad's own life; he loved seclusion and worshipped Allah in these caves till he received the first revelation.[193]

Waraqa was present also at Muhammad's marriage to his cousin Khadija. Warraqa encouraged his cousin to marry Muhammad:

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[189] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 99.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibn Wadhih Al-Ja'qubi. *Tarikh* (Historiae), 2 Vols. edited by M. Th. Houtsma. (Lugduni: Brill, 1883); Trimingham, *Christianity Among Arabs*, 263.
[192] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 73.
[193] It is not clear though if these caves hosted other people at the same time with Muhammad when he started to report the revelations he received.

> Khadija had told Waraqa ben Nawfal… what her slave Maysara[194] had told her that the monk had said [predicting his prophethood] and how he had seen the two angels shading him. [Waraqa] said 'if this is true, Khadija, verily Muhammad is the prophet of his people'.[195]

According to Father Haddad, Muhammad was raised in a Christian environment, and was nourished in the monotheistic faith of the Nasara/Jewish-Christian and Ebionite groups who were very influential in Mecca. He builds this view on reports from *al-Sira* tradition and using some other Muslim historical writings such as al-Ya'qubi. Waraqa was the leader of this movement.[196]

The second scholar is Abu Musa El-Hariri,[197] who is believed to be a Christian writer using a nickname. El-Hariri thinks that Waraqa was the tutor of Muhammad as the next leader or *Qis* (priest/bishop) of the *Nasara* in Mecca. Waraqa was translating the scriptures into Arabic; he was the bishop of Mecca at that time. His aim was to secure a successor to lead the *Nasara* after him.[198] Muhammad after the Hijra in 622[199] turned instead, however, to being a prophet. This change of focus was a betrayal of the original purpose of Waraqa.[200] El-Hariri builds his argument on the fact that Muhammad left Mecca when he lost the support of those Christians and his family who had protected and guided him. This loss started with the death of his uncle and guardian Abu Talib (a *Hanif*), his wife

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[194] A Christian who accompanied Muhammad in a trading trip to Syria before Khadija proposed to marry him
[195] Ibid, 83.
[196] Y. Haddad, *Naziratic Mission*, provides long treatises on this subject, p.p. 227-294; Ghada Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources" in *The Muslim World* 95 (2005): 67-80 argues that the Christians of Mecca were first-generation Christians and it is not possible that they had a big impact in Mecca and on Muhammad as they have no roots. My opinion is that new beginnings sometimes have more power than the established religions; the evidence is Islam itself which in less than 10 years in Medina changed the life of Arabia, and in 30 years changed the ME.
[197] Abu Musa El-Hariri, *Qis wa Nabi* (The Priest and the Prophet). http://www.muhammadanism.org/Arabic/book/hariri/priest_prophet_book.pdf Accessed on 10/12/2010; Hariri has also *Al-Massihiah fi Mizan al-Muslimeen* (The Christianity in the Balance of Muslims). http://www.muhammadanism.org/Arabic/book/hariri/christianity_balance_muslims.pdf Accessed 19/11/2010. *Nabiw al-Rahma wa Qur'an al-Muslimeen: Bahthun fi Mujtma' Makka* (Prophet of Mercy and the Qur'an of Muslims: Study on the Society of Mecca). http://www.muhammadanism.org/Arabic/book/hariri/prophet_mercy.pdf Accessed on 19/11/2010.
[198] Hariri, *Qis wa Nabi*, 6, 37-64.
[199] Immigration from Mecca to Medina.
[200] Ibid., 6.

Khadija[201] and Waraqa.[202] The period that followed these deaths is referred to by some Islamic traditions as a period in which "the revelation has stopped/slowed down".[203] After *Hijra*, the mode of the Qur'an changed from spiritual guidance and material to socio-political. The Qur'an started to refer to the new community that was created in Medina from the Meccan immigrants and the helpers[204] of Yathreb. El-Hariri argues also that some changes and modifications were made in the Qur'an regarding the Christians in the post-conquest era.[205]

El-Hariri and Haddad were writing in a time of tension between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon during the civil war (1975-1990) and the highly polemical tone of their writings can be understood in the context of war and propaganda against each other. That does not however decrease the scholarly research value of these works.

**2. Jesus Christ in the Qur'an**

Jesus has a big role in the Qur'anic narratives. He is known as '*Isa* (Jesus), which, according to scholars, has several interpretations.[206] My own interpretation is that this name is an adaptation of *Isous* in the Greek language, which was adapted into Arabic as *'Issa*. It is not the only time the Qur'an adopted and adapted Greek or Syriac words in its original Arabic text.[207]

The name of Jesus appears in the Qur'an in several forms: He is simply *'Isa* (ten times), *'Issa ibn Mariam* (Jesus son of Mary) (fifteen times), *al-Massieh* (Christ) (three times), *'Issa al-Massieh* (Jesus Christ) (three times), *al-Massieh ibn Mariam* (Christ son of Mary) (nine times), and is referred to as *Ibn Mariam* (Son of Mary) (twice). Mary is also a very important figure in the Qur'an as she is mentioned thirty-four times. There is one whole

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[201] Who provided him with financial and emotional support.
[202] Who provided him with religious and leadership support
[203] In Arabic *Fatara al-Wahi* فَتْرَ الوحي Ibid., 32-34; Haddad, *Naziratic Mission*, 99.
[204] *Ansar* انصار.
[205] Hariri, *Qis wa Nabi*, 209-220.
[206] Robinson, Neal. "Jesus" *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān.* General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2011. Brill Online.15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_COM-00099 ; David Thomas, "Arab Christianity", 5; Küng, *Islam*, 489.
[207] Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 45.

sura (*Suratu Mariam 19*) dedicated to her name and another sura to her family according to the Qur'an conviction (*Suratu Al 'Imran, 3*).

There are other biblical figures mentioned more than Jesus in the Qur'an such as Moses (one-hundred-thirty-six times) and Abraham (sixty-nine times). From these simple statistics, one can recognize the heavy influence of the Judaic-Christian tradition on the Qur'anic teachings and spirituality. What interests me particularly here is how Jesus is depicted in the Qur'an.

The story of Jesus' birth from Mary is told in Sura 19 (*Mariam*: 16-33) but the details differ from the biblical accounts. Mary's birth was also miraculous. She was conceived in her mother's womb by divine order and was purified and chosen from the womb to be Jesus' mother. This story is related in Sura 3 (*Al 'Imran*: 35-44). Mary and Jesus were both children of promise born for great responsibility and mission according to these accounts (3:35-36; 45-51).[208] They are both to preach the oneness of God. Thus, Jesus is not the son of God (19:35, 88-92; 5:72; 9:30; 72:3; 112:1-4). Although Jesus was God's word and from God's spirit (4:171), he was like Adam (3:59), created by God (3:47; 19:21) and he is God's servant (43:57-59; 5:75). [209]

Jesus' role was to confirm the Torah (3:50) as God's messenger to the Children of Israel by teaching them to follow God and worship Him alone (3:49-51). The Qur'an admits that Jesus performed miracles, but with God's permission and will (3:49; 5:110). When the Jews refused his teachings[210] he chose his disciples as a response to their *Kufr* (disbelief). The Qur'an calls His disciples *al-Hawariyyun* and *Ansar* (supporters) who were in line with the Muslim faith that Jesus was calling for (3:52). Jesus, like former prophets and like Muhammad, faced a Jewish plot to kill him [by handing him to the Romans to be crucified], but God saved him from this plot by causing him to die and took him to heaven (3:54-55). Therefore, the Jews cannot pride themselves on killing Jesus or crucifying the

[208] A good and extensive study on the influence of the apocryphal Proto-Gospel of James on the Qur'anic story of Mary as a promised Child is, Cornelia B. Horn, "Mary between Bible and Qur'an: Soundings into the Transmission and Reception History of the Proto evangelium of James on the Basis of Selected Literary Sources in Coptic and Copto-Arabic and of Art-Historical Evidence Pertaining to Egypt" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18/4 (Oct 2007): 509-538; See the full text in B. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 63-72.
[209] These titles, names and descriptions are discussed in Neal Robinson's article, "Jesus", mentioned above.
[210] There is no mention or explanation of any reason why the Jews refused Jesus and his teachings.

Messiah (4:157-158). It is not totally clear if Muhammad refused that Jesus was crucified to refute the Jewish claims or to please them in Medina. From the tone of the verse it seems he is refuting their claim, but it is not clear either that the Jews ever did claim responsibility for the killing or crucifying of the Messiah. Although Jesus was sent as prophet to the Children of Israel, his claims were disputed. Some believed him and became his *Ansar* and some disbelieved; God will fight the unbelievers (61:14). Jesus is to come back to the earth alive as a judge according to the Muslim traditions (19:33). As God saved Jesus from the Jewish plot, Muhammad trusted God to save him from the Jewish plot in Medina (5:82; 2:214).

As a result of this dogmatic belief in Jesus as God's creature, messenger and prophet, it is *kufr* to say, "Allah is the third of three" (5:73). Jesus did not ask the people (Christians) to worship him and his mother as God's associates (5:116-117). Jesus is not God according to his own declaration; on the contrary, he asked the children of Israel to worship God – his and their only God (5:72). The Qur'anic understanding of 'Jesus being the son of God' has a physical connotation and is therefore rejected. The Qur'an refuses the concept of God getting married to Mary (*Sahibah*/Consort) in order to have a son (6:101; 72:3).

**3. Jesus and the coming of Muhammad**

This is what the Qur'an claims in 61:6:

> And when 'Isa, son of Mariam, said: 'O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah to you confirming the Torah before me and giving glad tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad'. But when he (Ahmad) came to them with clear proofs, they said: 'This is plain magic'.

This issue has prompted much questioning and debate between Christians and Muslims throughout history. The issue of Jesus' 'prophecy' about the coming of Muhammad has been a key point of contention between Christians and Muslims. It is probably an idea that was added in later times because the name Ahmad was not used by Muslims before 125 A.H.[211] This tradition may have affected other Muslim traditions, such as some parts of *al-Sira* in which several 'Christians' are said to believe in Muhammad as a prophet whose

[211] M. Watt discusses the name 'Ahmad' and the interpretations of this verse in *Early Islam*, 43-50.

coming was predicted in their 'scriptures'. It seems also that there is a misunderstanding concerning Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit and the Qur'anic claim. Ibn Ishaq used John 15:23ff to state that "the *Munahhemana* in Syriac is Muhammad; in Greek he is the Paraclete".[212] Later Muslim apologetic writings used this concept to defend Muhammad's prophethood.

The conclusion that can be drawn from these images of Jesus, the Christians and their heritage is that the Qur'an was aware of Christian Scripture and of the main Christian dogmas such as Jesus the son of God, the Trinity, and the crucifixion. While Jesus' birth is detailed, and his resurrection is not mentioned at all in the Qur'an, his death and ascension are important to the Qur'anic Jesus. The Qur'an does not deny Jesus' death but links it with his ascension and return at the end of time (3:55).[213] Was this awareness a later development in the post-conquest era as Crone and Cook suggest in their book *Hagarism*?[214] Or was it an early response to the Jewish pride that they had crucified a false Messiah whom Muhammad, while still in Mecca, respected and acknowledged as the prophet of God? Was not that respect and acceptance of Jesus as the Christ and God's prophet an adoption of the Jewish-Christian teaching? The Jewish-Christians accepted Jesus as prophet, so they were not like the Jews who rejected him or the Christians who worshipped him as a divine being. The Christian sources available to Muhammad in Arabia helped in forming the early identity of Muslim beliefs of Christianity.

I am convinced that the Qur'anic accounts of Jesus are an early response to Jewish pride and the adoption of Jewish/Christian beliefs of him rather than a later awareness of Christian dogmas of the post-conquest era. In the Meccan suras about Jesus (6:85, 19:34, 42:13, 43:63) Jesus is mentioned as one of the prophets and in line with them. The dispute

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[212] See Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 90-95, 103-107; Watt, *Early Islam*, 46-47.

[213] Mahmoud Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion" in *The Muslim World* 70/2 (1980): 91-121; Reynolds, Gabriel S., "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* 72/2 (2009), 237-258.

[214] Patricia Crone & Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) say in the early chapters that all the Islamic knowledge, including the Qur'an, of Judeo-Christian information comes from the post-conquest era of Christian lands. They are in line with their teacher John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (NY: Prometheus Books, 2006); Watt, *Early Islam, 13*; and Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 48 refutes the claims of Wansbrough and Crone & Cook on the basis on their usage of weak sources. Fred Donner, "The Historical Context" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, 31-33 is in line with Wansbrough thesis.

about his relation to God is indicated. Was he the Son of God or not? However, the intensity of the tension about the Christian doctrines concerning Christ and his crucifixion comes in a more apologetic atmosphere in the Medinian suras when Muhammad came into direct contact with established Jewish communities. The Qur'anic texts defend Jesus from the disbelief of the Jews.[215] Muhammad's position in defending Jesus from the 'false beliefs' adopted by Christians may be seen as an expression of support for the *Haniffyya* teachings about the oneness of God, and also his 'faithfulness' to the *Nasrani* teachings of the Ebionites convictions about Jesus Christ. This is not surprising given that according to the canonical *Sirat Rasul Allah* [216] and other Muslim trusted historical writings about his life, Muhammad was raised up in a *Hanafi* family. Moreover, these sources tell about Muhammad's early encounters with the 'Christians' in Mecca as we have seen earlier.[217]

Back to the Crone and Cook theory, I think the development in the Muslim awareness of Christianity (and Judaism) was not a later development in the Qur'an as a whole. I accept and deal with the Qur'an as a canonical book trusted by Muslims today as coming directly from the age of Muhammad, assembled in the time of Othman. However, the Qur'anic commentaries, the prophetic tradition (*Hadith and Sira*) and the Muslim historiography are more likely to reflect a developed awareness of Christianity and its dogmas in the post-conquest era.[218] The Qur'anic verses were used to enforce what the writers of these sources found out in direct communication with Christians in their threefold church tradition. The new cultural setting of these late developments of Islamic traditional sources enlarged the Muslims' understanding of their religion from being a religion for the Arabs only[219] to a universal religion trying to assimilate with the universal call of Christianity. It is noticed that in the post-conquest era that Muslims stayed in big camps outside the cities and towns they conquered and did not start their 'preaching' of Islam to the residents of

[215] It is a more socio-political term than the term 'Children of Israel', which has religious connotations in the Qur'an.
[216] The Biography of Muhammad.
[217] Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 84-107 mentions some of these people and their expectations of a prophet. Ghada Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into Arabic Sources" in *The Muslim World* 95 (2005): 67-80.
[218] Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*. See the Introduction 3- 45; Alfred Guilluame, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Beirut: Khayats Book and Publishing Co., 1966).
[219] Arabs must be Muslims or leave Arabia. This was how Omar, the 2nd Caliph, dealt with the Christian and Jewish remnants in Najran and other places in Arabia.

these cities until later times. Was not the preaching of Islam to non-Arabs a reflection of this awareness of their universal message?

The Jewish-Christian influence on Islam is evident on the *Hadith* tradition about Christianity where most of the transmitters (*Isnad*) of this tradition, such as Ibn Munabeh and Ibn Ishaq, were from Jewish and Christian backgrounds and converted to Islam. These Hadith traditions quoting Muhammad are copying and modifying biblical material or doing so for polemical purposes.[220] The copying process indicates a good knowledge of the Biblical material that was acquired in the post-conquest era. It also shows how the Muslim reporters have adjusted some Christian stories to fit into the Muslim dogmatic framework.

## The Influence of Christianity on Islam

There are certain questions, that were addressed earlier, considered as taboo questions to be asked regarding the Christian influence on Islam. Such questions are: If the Christianity in Mecca was 'Jewish-Christian' Christianity, how did this 'Christianity' influence Islam and its Qur'an? Was the Qur'an affected at all by external factors beside the divine revelation of Allah? Though I have presented evidence of positive answers to these questions, my aim in investigating them was not polemical, but to discover why Muhammad chose to adopt certain 'Christian' teachings and refuse others. Why, for example, was Muhammad concerned to defend Christ against Jewish pride and claims? Who influenced Muhammad's religious thinking in the first place? I also want to explore in what ways the modern Muslim scholars developed their theories as a response to the Christian challenge that we have already explored.

The above questions were considered taboo because Muslims believe that the Qur'an is revealed directly from God to His prophet and messenger Muhammad. The revelation in the Muslim terminology is *Tanzil* (26:192, 32:2 and others), which means that the Qur'an was sent down or descended from heaven in the form of the revelations carried by God's

[220] Ibid., 30-31; *Al-Tabari, History*, 113, 122; Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 240-241, Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion" in *The Muslim World* 70/2 (1980): 96; Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus', 244.

angel Gabriel over the 23 years (610-632 AD) of Muhammad's prophetic mission. The Qur'an, in other words, was divinely dictated to Muhammad, whom Muslims believe was (*Ummi*) illiterate (62:2).[221] This 'sending down' process had no human intervention or any other contextual impact. Muhammad used to memorize these revelations and then recite them to his secretaries to write them down. It is important to note that *Tanzil* is mentioned in the Qur'an eleven times and all of them were revealed in Mecca. This indicates the sharp distinction between the Meccan spiritual revelations and the Medinian type of revelation that was mostly socio-political regulations.

Questioning this divine source of the Qur'an has not been welcomed by Muslims at any time in their history. All Eastern and Western Christian writings challenging the divine source of the Qur'an have therefore been responded to by Muslim apologists. I am, however, encouraged to deal with this sensitive issue, not for polemical purposes, but because, as a Christian living among fellow Muslim citizens I find modern Muslim thinkers who accept that due to the Christian presence in Mecca on the eve of Islam there was some 'Christian' impact on the Muslim message. These scholars, some of whom are not widely known in Western scholarship, if at all, have seen in the historical events a 'complementary factor' to the work of God in the revelation of the Qur'an. This view is very close to the way Christians understand God's revelation. Khalil Abd El-Karim is one of these Muslim religious thinkers who has written several books on this issue. His most controversial book was *Fatrat al-Takwin fi Hyyat al-Sadiq al-Ameen.*[222]

Abd al-Karim starts his work by introducing the Christian/*Nasrani* environment that Muhammad lived in. Abd al-Karim explained extensively in a former book the differences between the Christianity of today and the *Nasrania* of Judaic-Christian beliefs, for

[221] This concept can be contested because *Ummi* in context can mean a 'gentile' who is without a revealed book from God in contrast to Jews and Christians.

[222] Khalil Abd al-Karim, *Fatrat al-Takwin fi Hyyat al-Sadiq al-Ameen* (The Formation Period in the Life of the Truthful and Faithful One) (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrousa, 2004); He also has *Al-Jothor al-Tarikhia le-Shari'a al-Islamia* (The Historical Grassroots of Islamic Law) (Cairo: Sinai Publications, 1990); *Al-Nas al-Muassis wa Mujtama'uhu* (The Founding Text and its Social Setting), 2 Vols. (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrousa, 2002); *Qurayyish: Mina al-Qabilah ela al-Dawlah al-Markaziah* (Qurayyish: From the Tribe to the Central State) (Cairo: Sinai Publications, 1997); He also has other books not related directly to the research in this thesis. The title translations and any text translations that follow are mine. See also Ma'rouf El-Rusafi, *Al-Shakhsia al-Muhamadieha* (The Character of Muhammad) (Koln: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2002).

example, why the Qur'an talks about one gospel, not four, and why Paul is ignored in the Qur'an and the early Muslim writings and then rejected by Muslim scholars as the one who falsified the Christian faith. He also explains the relationship between the Gospel of Matthew as it was used by the *Nasara* in Arabia and the Ebionites' faith in Jesus as only a human apostle of God. Jesus for them was not God or the Son of God as Paul claimed him to be.[223]

Abd al-Karim states clearly that the *Hanafi* people of Mecca followed the *Nasrani* faith or principles. Although he is strongly committed to his faith in Muhammad as the apostle of God and the receiver of God's divine revelation, Abd al-Karim applies a historical-critical approach to the life of Muhammad.[224] Most of his sources are primary Muslim historical writings in addition to the *Sira* tradition and the Qur'an itself. He uses these sources and analyzes their contents with new eyes in order to present his argument that Muhammad was influenced and in fact was 'made'[i.e. his character and thoughts were formed] by the Ebionites of Mecca led by Waraqa ben Nawfal and Khadija (and other Christians).[225] For Abd al-Karim it was a great and successful experiment. This view does not contradict the Muslim conviction that Muhammad was the prophet of God; the Ebionites, however, helped the 'promised prophet' by forming and equipping him to take this divine message seriously and to preach it to his society. In other words, God called Muhammad to the prophethood in Arabia and God used these people to prepare Muhammad as a prophet. In this way the human effort complements the 'divine revelation'.[226]

Abd al-Karim argues that Waraqa, Khadija's cousin, was a *Nasrani / Ebionite* Christian who used to read the scriptures in Hebrew and translate them into Arabic. It is not known though if Waraqa read this gospel in the Hebrew language or in the *Karshuni* language, which was the Syriac language written in Hebrew letters. It seems likely that it was the latter because it was a widespread habit among the Syrians to write their holy tradition in a

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[223] Abd al-Karim, *Qurayyish: Mina al-Qabilah ela al-Dawlah al-Markaziah*, 187-194; Abd al-Karim, *Fatrat al-Takwin fi Hyyat al-Sadiq al-Ameen,* 151-154.
[224] Abd al-Karim, *Fatrat al-Takwin fi Hyyat al-Sadiq al-Ameen,* 18.
[225] Ibid., 35-41, 236-238. Abd al-Karim gives the title 'engineers' to Khadija and Waraqa. Waraqa's biography and his influence on Muhammad in Mecca is presented in, P.P. 147-174.
[226] Ibid., 19, 155-159.

holy language, and as noted before that the reciting of the Qur'an itself is influenced by the Syriac way of reading their scriptures and liturgy including the use of same rhythm and poetic system.[227] There are many indications that Muhammad heard (or he might have read) the 'Gospel of Matthew' or what is known as the 'Gospel according to the Hebrews'. Abd al-Karim argues that all the *Nasrani* doctrines about Christ were adopted in the Qur'an (3:171; 5:17, 72, 75; 19:30, 34-35) because Waraqa and Khadija worked together in teaching Muhammad their own beliefs through the reading of scriptures translated by Waraqa, and through the study sessions they used to have in Muhammad's presence where explanations of difficult concepts and doctrines were discussed.[228] Abd al-Karim concludes his argument by saying:

> The event in *Hiraa* Cave[229] was not an accidental event caused by superior fate, but a product of long preparation which took several years… in *Hiraa* was the product of this preparation, formation and pruning process.[230]

In another two-volume work, Abd al-Karim discusses the Qur'an as a founding text that was formed by its social settings; in this context he understands *asbab al-nuzul* [231] as a main force behind some Qur'anic texts and how the Qur'an itself was shaped by the new community of faith and shaped it at the same time. He says that the Qur'an chapters were influenced by three factors: Meccan and Medinian societies; Muhammad's personal desires; and the circumstances he faced that needed specific types of laws and *Shari'ah*.[232] In the second volume he differentiates between the two types of Muslim religious struggle, between Muhammad and the Christians on one hand and the Jews on the other hand. While the Muslim-Jewish struggle was political and developed into a militant clash, the Muslim-Christian struggle in the Qur'an was dogmatic. The main incident, according to Abd al-Karim, that made this dogmatic struggle clear is the conflict with the Christians of Najran. This Christian delegation came with their bishop to pay respect to Muhammad as the new leader of Medina. They refused to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet and then

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[227] Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, 72.
[228] Abd al-Karim, *Fatrat al-Takwin fi Hyyat al-Sadiq al-Ameen*, 147-151, 152-154, 160.
[229] Where Muhammad used to pray in seclusion and then is believed to have received the first revelation.
[230] Ibid., 160-161.
[231] Occasions of revelations.
[232] Abd al-Karim, *Al-Nas al-Muassis wa Mujtama'uhu*, (The founding text and its Context/society) Vol. I, 28-29.

had a theological and Christological disputation with him. At that time Muhammad received the Sura of *Al-'Imran* (3) that clarifies his position concerning Jesus and Mary. For him this incident was a turning point in the Muslim-Christian dogmatic struggle.[233]

Abd al-Karim does not ask the question: Were these verses, and what follows in the Medina Qur'an, a direct adoption of the *Nasrani* position against the 'Orthodox' Christians of Najran? Ibn Ishaq, in his biography of Muhammad, described the Najran delegation as if they were Melkites. Ibn Ishaq described their bishop as "the Christian kings of Byzantium had honored him and paid him a subsidy and gave him servants and built churches for him".[234] Some other sources argue that the Christians of Najran were mainly Jacobites as we have seen earlier. This confusion concerning the type of Christianity in Najran shows that Christian identity was not yet final in the area.

Abd al-Karim is very much convinced that some kind of Christianity was spread in Arabia and in its border territories before the rise of Islam as religion. It is evident for him that the monasteries, the monks, and the poets had an impact on the Arab society and religious thinking. Hence the presence of Mary's and Jesus' images in the Ka'ba and the frequent use of biblical names such as Ibrahim (Abraham), Eshak (Isaac) and Ismael (Ishmael) among Arabs.[235]

Another Muslim historian, Jawad 'Ali, presents and discusses in detail the *Nasrani* presence in Arabia and its surroundings in different parts of his encyclopedia on the Arab religions before Islam.[236] 'Ali is aware that the Christianity spread among Arabs was in three main streams and he recognizes the role of *al-Hira* in spreading the Nestorian Christian teachings in the Syriac language, which had a great impact on developing the Arabic language too.[237] He downplays Christian influence on Mecca, however, and neglects the impact of language in transmitting concepts into new settings. 'Ali is careful

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[233] Ibid., Vol. II, 314-318; See Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 270-277; Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 17.
[234] Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 271.
[235] Abd al-Karim, *Qurayyish: Mina al-Qabilah ela al-Dawlah al-Markaziah* (Qurayyish), 171-187.
[236] Jawad Ali, *Al-Mufasal fi Tarikh al-'Arab Qabla al-Islam* (The Detailed History of Arabs before [the coming of] Islam), 10 Volumes. (Baghdad: Baghdad university, 1993).
[237] Ibid., Vol. VI, 583-607, 626-629.

in describing the different 'Christian' sects / heresies that had a presence in Mecca and Medina, but he does not reflect on their teachings as they are responded to or adopted in the Qur'an. He mentions the Ebionites, Elkhesaites, the Nazarenes, the Collyridiens and the Arian teachings.[238] 'Ali is careful not to make any comparisons between the teachings of these sects and the Qur'an. I think that 'Ali was writing to the Muslim and Arab audience at a time when the conservative environment among Arab and Muslim scholars was prevailing. However, in admitting the presence of these sects and the presentation of their teachings he opened the door for other Muslim scholars like Abd al-Karim to reflect on the Christian presence and possible influence on the Qur'an. 'Ali gives an indication of the worship of Mary as god in the teachings of the Collyridiens (compare with 5:116-117); the importance of purification by water and circumcision in the Elkhesaites teachings (compare with 5:6); and what a group of Arians taught by rejecting Jesus' divine sonship on the basis that God did not get married in order to have a son (compare with 6:101; 72:3).[239]

This kind of comparison shows how the Qur'an was influenced by the 'Christian' teachings on two levels. One is positive and involves the adoption of some of the teachings and practices from these sects; the other is negative involving the negation of any teaching that contradicts the main message of Islamic *Tawhid*: The Oneness of God.

Prince Hassan of Jordan in his book *Christianity in the Arab World* also recognizes the presence of the Ebionites in Mecca in the time of Muhammad and he mentions their Christology, which reflects the true 'divine religion' that Islam came to confirm and continue.[240] He believes that there is no basic contradiction between them and Islam.

M. Faruk Zein argues against Paul and his Hellenistic theology, and declares that,

> The Qur'an restored to Jesus his humanity and highlighted the value of his historical prophetic mission…Islam stressed the

[238] Ibid., 634-637.
[239] Ibid.
[240] El-Hassan bin Talal, *Christianity in the Arab World* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1998), 9-16.

> mission of the Jesus of history while rejecting the mythical Jesus of Paul and the theology of Pauline Church.[241]

By accusing Christianity of being diverted by Paul, Zein asserts the similarities between the Nazarenes' and Islamic Christology. His verification of these similarities rests on the claim that both are revealed from the same source, Allah. He also acknowledges Islam as the revival of the Nazarene/Ebionite faith in Jesus. This is evident because the Qur'an speaks about one *Injil* (Gospel) and not four. The Ebionites had the one 'Gospel to the Hebrews' that agrees with the Qur'an as to who Christ was.[242] Zein's thesis depended on the new findings about the Historical Jesus in the West.[243]

Yousef Zaidan is one of the latest Muslim writers who accepts this influence and says that the Qur'an reflected what happened in its own context.[244] The Qur'an shows awareness of the religious realities on the ground. By reflecting on the struggles between the religious groups in its social setting, the Qur'an reconstructed the image of the 'true religion of God' through relating the prophetic stories of the Bible (among them the story of Jesus) in new ways and with a new focus.[245]

In light of these modern developments and the acceptance of a different 'Christianity' in Arabia, the question about the Christian impact on Islam and the type of Christianity that Islam engaged within its text takes on new importance. Again, the aim in exploring this issue is not polemical. My aim is to establish a better understanding between Christians and Muslims. On historical grounds, ignoring the Christian influence on the Qur'an is not possible any more in the light of the new developments in Muslim thinking. Even some

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[241] M. Faruk Zein, *Christianity, Islam, and Orientalism* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 68; The most extensive work in Arabic on the issue of Paul and Christianity is in Ahmad Zaki. *Inza'w Qinaa'a Boulous 'an Wajh al-Massieh* (Remove Paul's Mask from Christ's Face) (Amman: Dar al-Hadatha, 1995); See also Ibn Qirnas, *Masihyyat Boulous wa Qustantine* (The Christianity of Paul and Constantine) (Kölen, Germany: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2008).

[242] Ibid., 87-92; For the concept of *Injil* in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition see B. Carra de Vaux, "Indjīl" *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman; , Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. 15 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0373

[243] Ibid., 9-11.

[244] Yousef Zaidan, *Al-Lahut al-'Arabi wa Usul al-'Unf al-Dinni* (The Arab Theology and the Grassroots of Religious Violence) (Cairo: Dar al-Shorok, 2010), 139-140.

[245] Ibid., 137-152.

conservative Muslim scholars do not deny the Christian impact on Islam, but they are still careful about admitting it.[246] My aim is not to underestimate or eliminate the Islamic concept of revelation, but to find a way to establish mutual understanding among both communities. Moreover, from scholarly evidence it appears that Muslims built their views about Christianity from a source that Christians at the time of the Qur'an and Muhammad did not recognize as orthodox. Mahmoud Ayoub, a prominent Muslim scholar who lives in the West, calls for an understanding of Islam as it is presented by Muslims.[247] My call to Muslims here is to understand Christianity as it is presented by Christians, especially in the East where Christians have been faithful to their orthodox Christianity from the beginning, despite the theological debates and divisions they have had.

Muslim scholars do not deny today the similarities between the Ebionite (or Jewish-Christian sect) doctrines about Jesus Christ and the Qur'an. However, they argue that these similarities are not the product of a Christian 'heretical' impact on the Qur'an, but reflect the continuity of the 'right religion' revealed by the same God who in the Qur'an has revived the original message of *Tawhid.*[248] It is not about influence, but about the one and enduring message of God communicated to Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and lastly to Muhammad.[249] This message, it is claimed, was distorted (*Tahrif*) by the Christians and Jews (2:75-81, 3:78-84, 4:46-57, 5:13-19 and 41-50). All these Qur'anic verses are from the Medina period when Islam became an established and independent religion. The concept of *Tahrif* of the scriptures in these verses is debated as to whether it is textual or exegetical. An important question arises here, however: if Muslims were aware of the fake doctrines or the corruption of scripture by the Christians in the conquered areas, why did they tolerate these Christians and seek to understand their faith for the first one hundred years at least? Was Islam the product of a hidden struggle between 'Jewish-Christianity' and the three Christian Churches? It is highly probable.

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[246] See, for example, Fazlur Rahman, "Pre-Foundations of the Muslim Community in Mecca" in *Studia Islamica* 43 (1976): 5-24; Omar, Irfan (ed.), *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (NY: Orbis Books, 2007); Ghada Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts…" in *the Muslim World* 95 (2005): 67-80.

[247] Mahmoud M Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shi'i Muslim Literature" in *The Muslim World* 66/3 (1976): 165.

[248] The belief in the Oneness of God.

[249] See for examples Fazlur Rahman; Mahmoud Ayoub; Khalidi; and Faruk Zein works.

Verses of *Tahrif* can be understood in its socio-political context. Muhammad was addressing certain incidents that happened to him in relation to the people of the book (Christian and Jews) in Medina. The accusation, according to most prominent Muslim commentators, involves changing the meaning (verbal misinterpretation) of the scriptures or their laws but not corrupting the sacred texts themselves, as later Muslim scholars claimed. Their claim, however, came as a result of a certain political situation and so Muslim Caliphs were open to listen to the Christian defense of their faith.[250]

Early Christian and Muslim chronicles are full of details regarding the Christian theological and Christological divisions in the first six centuries that were examined in the first chapter. The struggle between 'orthodox' Christianity and 'Jewish-Christianity' and other Gnostic movements is not, however, covered in the same intensity, particularly in Arabia. It is also difficult to judge if a movement and its teachings die totally and forever especially in a time of struggle and open exchange of concepts. Concepts do not simply die. As a result there were certain areas of influence that can be located in the Qur'an that come not only from the Jewish-Christian/Ebionite tradition. This fact is proven in the ongoing Christian struggles over theological issues and identity formation during the first six centuries. I also think that church history in the first centuries was written for polemical purposes; the knowledge we have is based on how people, generally speaking, had written down their history in order to defend their theology, and eventually their hierarchy and 'identity'. In the light of this what are the 'other' sources the Christians in Arabia used, and how did Islam adopt or respond to them?

In addition to what was discussed above concerning the similarities between the Qur'an and Jewish-Christian groups, I have noted that the Qur'an reflects knowledge of different 'Christian' sources. This knowledge was either adopted in the Qur'an as the truth about Christ or it was deemed wrong or accused by the Qur'an as false teaching or *kufr* and so

[250] George Al-Kopti, "What kind of *Tahrif* (distortion) does the Qur'an accuse the people of the book of doing to their Holy Bible?" Unpublished paper was done as a final project to the course 'Introduction to Qur'an', Masters' program at Near East School of Theology, Beirut, 2008. It studied the major Qur'anic verses of *Tahrif* in the light of main commentaries of the Qur'an.

there is this double influence seen in the adoption of some teaching and the negation of other teaching on Christ and Christianity. For example, while the Qur'an adopted the Ebionite and Arian views of Jesus' mere humanity and his identity as a prophet of God, it also adopted the Nestorian emphasis that Mary was the mother of Jesus[251] and not the Theotokos (the mother of God). Actually, the concept of Theotokos was mixed up with the worship of Venus in al-Hira to the northeast of Arabia where a trinity of father, mother and son was common according to *de Seert* and Ibn al-Batriq histories.[252] This type of worship was common in the area and had a great impact on the Arabic language of Arabia. Language is always a means of communication and transmission of concepts.

It is clear that the following conversation between God and Jesus is a Qur'anic response to a concept of the Trinity other than that presented in orthodox Christian Theology.

> And when Allah will say 'O 'Isa son of Mary: Did you say to men: worship me and my mother as two gods beside Allah?'(5:116); [Jesus denies this divine accusation and says] "never did I say to them aught except what you did command me to say: worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord (5:117).

It seems likely this Qur'anic position regarding the worship of Mary was a reaction to the excessive veneration and glorification of Mary by the Monophysites and Melkites who developed this attitude in their turn as a reaction to Nestorianism.

Another issue of contention is the debate about Jesus' crucifixion and death, which is crucial in the Muslim mind. The Qur'an assures believers that Jesus was not killed and crucified; rather someone who looked like him was crucified in his place (4:157). The Muslim defense of this view is that God would not let His apostle be killed by the Jews, so he caused the one who betrayed him to be crucified.[253] It is interesting to note that Docetic

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[251] Mentioned fifteen times in the Qur'an.

[252] S. G. Mgr. Addai Scher, *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Seert), Deuxieme Partie (II)* (Rome : Pontificio Istiute Orientale, Brepols, 2003), 468-469 (Arabic); Cheikho, L. (ed.), *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus.* Series Tertia-Tomus VI (Arabic) (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico, 1905), 126.

[253] Or someone else; there are four main suggestions of who was crucified in Jesus' place in the Islamic tradition. See Reynolds, Gabriel S., "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" in *Bulletin of School of Oriental*

dogma developed this view about Jesus. Docetism is the view that Jesus only appeared to suffer and die on the cross. A sect of the Docetic groups developed the concept of the replacement of Jesus at the crucifixion and the Qur'an adopted this view without explaining why God did not follow the easier way of saving Jesus from the plot without the need to let any innocent man (or Judas Iscariot) die in his place. The Docetic teachings were embodied in some apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Philip.[254]

The use of apocryphal sources, which may have been part of the oral traditions spread in Arabia, is also evident in the account of Jesus' birth in the Qur'an. The image the Qur'an draws of the baby Jesus speaking to the people to defend his mother's honor and explain his mission (19:28-34; 3:46) reflects some apocryphal Christian writings used since the fifth Century in Egypt. We have come across such writing in Chapter One in the form of a letter/sermon written by Patriarch Timothy of Alexandria, Dioscorus' successor, in defense of the Monophysite doctrine.[255] It is most probable that the knowledge of these stories about Jesus' infancy was transmitted to Arabia through the strong Monophysite Church of Abyssinia, and through Yemen and Najran. This spiritual link with Abyssinia is evident in the story of the early Muslims who emigrated to Abyssinia to escape the persecution in Mecca. The immigrants used this story in *Surat Mariam* (19) to convince the Abyssinian king (the Negus) not to hand them over to the Meccan delegation who came to capture them and return them to Mecca. Ibn Ishaq records the Negus' response when he had listened to this sura: "of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche".[256]

Moreover, it is one of the Islamic convictions that Gabriel, God's angel who communicated the revelations to Muhammad, was also the Holy Spirit. This conviction is reflected in the stories of other prophets whose stories are told in the Qur'an and in the Qur'anic account of the annunciation. The Spirit was personified in the form of the angel

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*and African Studies* 72/2 (2009), 237-258; Ayoub, Mahmoud M., "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion" in *The Muslim World* 70/2 (1980): 91-121.

[254] Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 38-44; McGrath, *Heresy*, 111-116, 221-229.

[255] Timothy Aelurus, *L'homélie sur l'église du Rocher / attribuée à Timothée Ælure*. Trans. & Edited by Anne Boud'hors, Ramez Boutros in *Patrologia Orientalis* (Turnhout, Belqique: Brepols, 2001), 120.

[256] Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 152.

Gabriel: "She (Mary) placed a screen from them, then we sent to her our *Ruh* (spirit) [angel Jibril (Gabriel)], and he appeared before her in the form of a man in all respects" (19:17). Al-Tabari and other major Qur'an commentators agree that the Ruh/Spirit in this text is Gabriel the angel.[257] Moreover, the 'Holy Spirit' is associated with Jesus three times (2:87,253; 5:110). The 'Holy Spirit' in these verses is described as supporter and helper (*ayadnahu* أيدناهُ). This same concept about the Holy Spirit being a supreme angel of God is mentioned in a letter by Athanasius to Serapion, bishop of Thmius c.358AD supporting him against an anti-Arian movement:

> you write, beloved and truly longed for, yourself also in distress, that certain persons, having forsaken the Arians on account of their blasphemy against the Son of God, yet oppose the Holy Spirit, saying that he is not only a creature, but actually one of the ministering spirits, and differs from the angels only in degree.[258]

It is not clear to what extent and where this view of the Holy Spirit was spread around, however it had been one of the main issues the Church struggled with until the council of Constantinople in 381, which decreed the divinity of the Holy Spirit and included it in the Creed. It could be that the holders of this view about the Holy Spirit were to be found throughout the areas into which Christianity had spread and that they spread their teachings among some Arab tribes, or it may have been the case that belief in the Holy Spirit appearing as an angel of God became popular among some Christians or monasteries influential in and around Arabia, especially the Elkhesaites.

The last feature of Qur'anic teaching that may reveal a Jewish-Christian influence concerns the *Qiblah* or direction of prayer, a very important issue for Islam. Jerusalem was the first *Qiblah* in Islam. Most Islamic scholars agree that Muhammad chose Jerusalem as his direction of prayer in an effort to get the support of the Jewish community in Medina. When he could not get their support and recognition, the divine order in the Qur'an

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[257] See *Altafsir.com* which provides the original text of Muslim exegesis from different commentaries, different times and different Muslim sects. http://www.altafsir.com/indexArabic.asp. Some of them are provided in English.

[258] J. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents illustrating the history of the Church, AD 337-461* (London: SPCK, 1989), 79.

changed the *Qiblah* to Mecca as a sign of total independence from the Jewish community. This change of attitude shaped, later on, the Muslim political attitude toward the Jews (2:142-150).[259] A further possibility, however, is that Muhammad chose Jerusalem as his first *Qiblah* not because he was seeking Jewish support but because he was following a long tradition of the Ebionites who prayed toward Jerusalem as part of their devotional life and belief. The Ebionite documents[260] encourage me to adopt the second possibility, noting that the change of *Qiblah* was a move toward completing the formation of the pure Arab religion of Islam as Din Ibrahim (the religion of Abraham). The introduction to the change of the *Qiblah* in the Qur'an is a description of the building of the *Ka'ba* in Mecca by Abraham and his son Ishmael followed by a debate about the true religion of God (2:124-141). The context of this change, therefore, is not a concern about Muslim-Jewish relations.

I contend that while Muhammad and the early Muslims were aware of the different Christian factions, they had little knowledge of their major doctrinal differences and Muhammad himself adopted the Jewish-Christian belief in the Oneness of God and Jesus as God's prophet. This conclusion is built on the fact that Muhammad was born into a *Hanif* family and was raised in a monotheistic atmosphere that was intensified by his marriage to a *Nasrani* woman, Khadija, who was the cousin of a Christian Ebionite scholar and possibly a cleric in Mecca. Furthermore, it is evident that Christianity and Judaism as two monotheistic religions played a big role in shaping the Arab's religious lives. Most of the poets and public speakers were Christians. They reflected their Christian and Judaic values and terminology, or at least their monotheism (and not paganism).[261]

In the light of these findings, was Muhammad's success an achievement and an accomplished mission by Jewish-Christianity and the movements influenced by it? Perhaps Muhammad (and later on early Muslims) was not fully aware of the Christians'

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[259] Fazlur Rahman, "Pre-Foundations of Muslim Community in Mecca", 22-23.
[260] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 100.
[261] Lewis Cheikho, *Al-Nasranyya wa Adabuha bena 'Arab al-Jahyylia* (Christianity and its Literature among Arabs in the Pre-Islamic Times) http://www.muhammadanism.org/Arabic/book/arabic_pre-islamic_christian_literature/arabic_pre-islamic_christian_literature.pdf Accessed on 25/5/2011; Basher Copti, *Al-Masihiyya fi al-She'er al-Jahhylie* (Christianity in Al-Jahhiyylia Poetry) (Arabic), 2008.

theological struggles; one of them was the hidden struggle between Christianity in the North, where there were three different traditions, and Jewish-Christianity which found in Arabia a shelter and an environment to adapt and grow. I suggest that when the Qur'an describes itself as a continuation of Christianity, it is really describing an adoption of the teachings Muhammad was exposed to in Arabia, and particularly in Mecca. The new converts to Islam from Christian, Jewish and *hanifi* traditions helped in forming later Muslim traditions by adopting this line of thought. We will see in the Christian writings among the Chalcedonian Melkites, the Jacobites and the Nestorians how those Christians were not sure about what Islam consisted in and what teachings Muslims held in the first period of contact, both before and during the conquest time and within the first Umayyad rule. When Christians discovered Islam in its holy text (in Arabic), the movement among Christian theologians started to discuss the origins of Islam as a 'Christian Heresy'. This means, in my opinion, that Islam was a continuation of the hidden struggle between a Hellenized Christianity and a long neglected Jewish-Christianity. This conclusion does not mean that I accept the concept of 'Islam as Christian Heresy'; Islam as a religion clearly developed and became independent during the course of history.

## Summary

This chapter has covered the Christian presence in Arabia before Islam. It showed that Christianity in Arabia was actually a Jewish-Christianity (Ebionite) that had a great impact on the Muslim view of Christian orthodox doctrines and beliefs. Muhammad was no doubt influenced by these views and adopted many of them which is evident in the Qur'an. Discussing the influence of Christianity on Islam and its holy book was not accepted by Muslims for a long time. Their rejection was grounded on the Muslim belief that Qur'an is revealed directly from Heaven to Muhammad over twenty three years. The early and Modern Christian-Muslim dialogue and books discussed this issue as part of their polemics against each other, however, there is a great development in the Muslim way of thinking.

Some modern Muslim scholars accept now that some type of Christianity affected Islam as religion in Arabia. Their view is grounded on the historical and social evidence. They, however, say that Islam, by adopting some Christian Ebionite teachings, is actually

continuing the 'true' religion of God. This leads us to ask how Christians and Muslims understood themselves and each other in the first years and centuries of real interaction in the region of the Middle East. That will be covered in the next chapter.

# Chapter Three: Early Christian Interpretation of the Islamic Conquests and the Developments of Christian-Muslim Relations and Dialogue under the Umayyad Caliphate (A.D 660-750)

The previous chapter discussed how Islam was born in Arabia into a widely Jewish–Christian environment and the ways in which that context shaped its emerging self-understanding.

Arab/Muslim conquest and expansion across 632-660 AD changed the face of history, and in particular the history of the previously Christian-dominated areas in the Middle East. In doing so it also shaped Christian understanding of Arab Muslim identity and their engagement with that. Initially Islam was not understood as a new religion by Christians, however. Even Arab/Muslim conquerors were not themselves fully aware of it as such, especially in terms of universality as a religion for all peoples. Islam was born as a religion of and for the Arabs. The Qur'an was written in 'clear Arabic tongue'.[262] Across the seventh century this would change, however, and consequently impact upon Christian theology and identity.

The aim of this chapter is not to give detailed accounts of the Arab/Muslim conquests[263] or the details of the Arab/Muslim rule under the Umayyads (661-750 AD), the first dynasty of Muslim rulers.[264] Instead, this chapter will look at how Christians in these areas perceived the conquests and the consequent Arab Muslim Umayyad administrative arrangements, and argue that the Arab/Muslim conquerors were not fully aware of their own new religion of Islam, especially its universality as a religion for all peoples. Islam

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[262] *The Qur'an* 14:4; 16: 103; 26: 195.

[263] For Arab/Muslim conquest detailed accounts see Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Walter Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 10th ed. , 2002), 139-168.

[264] For a detailed account of the Umayyad rule see for example Hitti, *Arabs,* 189-287; P.M Holt & others (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. I: The Central Islamic Lands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 58-103.

was born as a religion of and for the Arabs. The Qur'an was written in 'clear Arabic tongue'.

The Arab/Muslim conquest of the dominant Christian areas in the Middle East in the seventh century created a new phenomenon of religious, socio-political and legal interaction between the two religions and their respective communities. The Christian churches in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt found themselves facing a new challenge after the Arab/Muslim conquest. Earlier challenges had included the threat of heretical movements, internal divisions and identity-formation issues during and after the great church councils. These were discussed in detail in Chapter One. They had contributed to the context of political unrest in the area due to the continual Byzantine-Persian wars over the control the Middle East. After the Arab conquest, the Christians had to address the new challenge of Islam on a variety of levels and to interpret it from a variety of angles. Christians interpreted the Arab/Muslim conquests using the worldview of their own denominational church. This fact was reflected in the different, and sometimes contradictory, reactions toward the Arab/Muslim conquests as will be presented and discussed in this chapter. The common factor in their interpretations, as will be shown, was self-critical and mutual accusations among the Christians themselves. Their interpretations were part of their defensive attitude toward other Christians and reflected the ongoing condemning of one another as heretics. This culminated in the later accusation of Islam as 'A Christian Heresy' as claimed by John of Damascus.[265]

The Arab/Muslim expansion was not aimed at spreading the religion of Islam among the people they had conquered as the later Islamic writings claim; rather it was a natural movement of a powerful nation experienced in the art of war out into new lands. The Arab/Muslim expansion was driven by the unity of the Arab people, united under one leadership, together with the great spiritual and religious motivation of the new religion of Islam. The birth of this united and powerful 'nation' came at the time of a vacuum of power in the Middle East. It is evident that the later and only surviving Islamic historical

[265] *The Qur'an* 14:4; 16: 103; 26: 195.

writings interpreted, retrospectively, the expansion in terms of religious wars, waged in order to spread the religion of Islam among the peoples outside Arabia.

For their part, it is clear from the early Christian writings that Christians did not think of Islam as a new religion, for they interpreted the Arab conquests in terms of their own Christian theology. Only later did Christians develop their understanding of Islam as a religion.

The main issues that will be addressed in this chapter are as follows: The force that was behind the Arab/Muslim military conquests of the lands outside Arabia where Islam was born as a religious phenomenon. How the Arabs/Muslims understood or perceive their conquests. How the Christians understood these conquests from their own theological and socio-political context of the seventh century. What the Muslim initial reaction was to the internal theological differences between Christians in the conquered lands. On one level, the Christian internal dogmatic divisions were fierce, and on the other level, there were major dogmatic Christian differences from how the Qur'an perceived them. (The Qur'an at the time of the conquests was transmitted and memorized orally). How Christian-Muslim relations developed under the Umayyads who moved the Islamic capital from Medina to Damascus. What the status of the Christians under the early Muslim rule was. How and why these interactions changed under the second Umayyad Caliphate dynasty (the Marwanids) in Damascus. How the theological challenge of Islam shaped the Christian theological response at the end of the Umayyad rule c.750 AD.

To be able to address these issues, we need to consider the situation of the Middle East in the seventh century. This will help to draw a clearer picture of what happened. The events of that century changed the course of history and opened the door for the creation of a new 'imperial' power, established on the ruins of the Byzantine (partly) and Persian empires. The vacuum of power, created after the long struggle between these two empires, opened the way for the Arabs who were now united under Islam to invade and conquer the old world.

## The situation in the Middle East before the Arab/Muslim conquest

When Prophet Muhammad died in AD 632 and his first Caliph Abu Bakr gained power, the Middle East had been badly affected by the long wars between the Persian and the Byzantine empires on the one hand and the internal Christological divisions and conflicts on the other. These struggles exhausted the armies and the people of these empires right on the eve of the Arab/Muslim movement to conquer the lands north, north-west and east of Arabia.

The Persians first invaded the Eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire in AD 605 and had full control over Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Egypt from AD 614 to 628. Heraclius, after becoming the Byzantine emperor in AD 610, regained these areas for Byzantium with the help of the Arab Christian tribe of Ghassan, and finally re-introduced the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in a great feast in AD 630.[266] At that time the Muslims started launching quick raids on the frontier towns of the Byzantine Empire, involving battles such as the Battle of Mu'ta, which was conducted under the direction of Muhammad himself. Heraclius at the time did not take these raids seriously, as the Arab custom was to launch such raids to gain booty before returning to the desert. A Greek historian reported an Arab raid in Syria in AD 611-612: "the Saracens [Arabs] invaded Syria and after devastating several villages, returned home [i.e desert]".[267] It was left to the Christian Arab tribe of Ghassan to protect the borders due to their relationship with Byzantium as a client tribe.[268]

Meanwhile, the Persian Empire was exhausted at this time, having suffered defeat by the Byzantines. Some sources say that Heraclius, after he had liberated Edessa from the Persians, stayed there for a while so as to weaken the Persian leadership. One of the

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[266] Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26-27; Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century, Vol. I, Part I: Political and Military History* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 636-644. Irfan Shahid books are specialized in the Roman/Byzantium – Arab relations from early times to the beginning of the seventh century with special focus on the contribution of the Ghassanid Christian Arabs to the Byzantine wars.

[267] Cyril Mango & Roger Scott (eds.), *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 429.

[268] Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs,* 645; Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 35; Hitti, Arabs,143.

measures Heraclius took to achieve this goal was to massacre the Jews in Edessa because they had collaborated with the Persians during the war between the two empires.[269] He also forced Jews in the empire to be baptized, aiming at religious uniformity. This action of converting the Jews forcefully to Christianity coincided with the start of the Arab conquest of the southern borders of the empire.[270]

The long war cost the two powers the loss of thousands of souls,[271] affecting the financial situation of the people and the governments and weakening the provinces that were both the battlefields of the struggle and, with Constantinople made more central with the recovery of the eastern provinces, suffering from lesser services and communications in the provinces.

As Heraclius saw it, the Christological struggle was still an influential weakness of the Byzantine Empire. He tried several times to reconcile the church to one Christological formula in order to create religious uniformity and thus strengthen the empire against any outside threat. He also tried to open dialogue with the Nestorian Church, making use of the visit of Catholicos Ishoyahb II. Ishoyahb was delegated by the Persian empress Boran II in AD 630 to meet with Heraclius in Aleppo to renew the peace truce between the two empires. The meeting included a theological dialogue and it is reported that communion was celebrated in Heraclius's presence,[272] however it seems to have ended without any genuine impact on church unity because the Nestorian Church was under Persian rule.

Heraclius sought uniformity between the Monophysite and the Chalcedonian Churches that were under his rule.[273] The result of this was the Monothelete compromise that Heraclius and Sergius – the Patriarch of Constantinople – suggested as a solution to the Christological divisions among the Monophysites and Chalcedonians. Although

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[269] Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 217-219; Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50-51.
[270] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 216; Mango & Scott, The Chronicle of Theophanes, 459.
[271] An estimated 200,000 people were killed. Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 195.
[272] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 212-213, 219. Heraclius's stay in Edessa after the treaty might aim to Christianize Persia according to Kaegi.
[273] See chapter one above.

Athanasios, the Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch agreed in AD 631 to discuss this doctrine of "One Will and One Energy in Christ," the Monophysites refused to accept it. This angered Heraclius. The Armenian Church accepted Chalcedon under military pressure from Heraclius who is thought to have been of Armenian origin. The difficult situation with the Monophysites involved the Coptic Church. There is no evidence that Heraclius ever visited Egypt, although it was one of the most important provinces of his empire.[274]

Heraclius added to the failure to communicate with this important province by appointing in AD 631 Kyros[275] as the patriarch and ruler of Egypt. Kyros was based in Alexandria, the patriarchal seat of the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin. His appointment aimed at converting the Copts to the imperial (Chalcedonian) church. Kyros managed in AD 633 to convene a Synod in Alexandria where two 'Monophysite bishops' "signed a tome of union that acknowledged one single energy/activity in Christ". Kyros's appointment and actions angered the Coptic Church and people, especially when their patriarch Benjamin had to flee Alexandria and live in exile until the arrival of the Arabs.[276] *History of the Patriarchs* gives a detailed account of al-Muquqas' actions against the Copts and their Patriarch Benjamin. The writer, interestingly, describes Benjamin's escape from Kyros in terms of an angelic order for him to hide for ten years until God should provide deliverance, which he understood to be the Arab conquest and the Byzantine defeat.[277]

Heraclius's unwise decisions continued, but now in Palestine. Sophronius, a native from Damascus and a fervent defender of Chalcedon was not happy with the Monothelete doctrine that Heraclius was pressing upon the Christians, including the Chalcedonians. Sophronius became the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 633/634 with Heraclius' approval, after swearing an oath that he would not attack Monotheletism publicly. Sophronius, however,

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[274] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 211
[275] Known as Al-Muquqas المقوقس in Arabic sources.
[276] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 216; Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the Time of Muhammad till the Fourteenth Century* (NY: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1967), 27.
[277] B. Evetts (ed. & Trans.) History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, Part II, Peter I to Benjamin I (661) in *Patrologia Orientalis, Tome I, Fascicule 4* (Paris: Firmin-Didot ET Cie, Impriemeurs-Editeurs, 1948), 490-493.

anathematized the Monothelete doctrine directly after his ordination by issuing synodical letters that were sent to Constantinople and Rome.[278] It seems that the feeling of resentment and refusal of the Monothelete doctrine was widespread among the Christians of Syria. The people of Homs, for example, refused to welcome Heraclius accusing him of being 'Maronite,' which equaled being a 'heretic' at the time, because the Maronites were the only Christians to accept the Monothelete doctrine.[279]

Heraclius also made three hasty financial decisions that proved later to be wrong and influential in the Byzantine failure to stop the Arab/Muslim conquests.

Firstly, he ordered the termination of monetary payments to the friendly Arab Christian tribes of Ghassan. This decision enraged those Arabs who had fought alongside him against the Persians. He also tightened the measures against their trading. The result was resentment, disrespect and rebellion towards the imperial authority since Ghassanids belonged to the Monophysite/Jacobite Church. These actions contributed to the creation of a vacuum in authority and control on the southern borders of Syria and Palestine on the eve of the Arab Muslim conquests.[280]

Secondly, Heraclius reduced the budget of the Byzantine army, thinking that the threat of the Persians was eliminated after the last war. This decision also created feelings of resentment among the soldiers who participated in that war. They found that their efforts in liberating the lands were not appreciated. He also depended on family members to lead the army regardless of their abilities, such as his brother Theodore who was appointed to

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[278] Mango & Scott, The Chronicle of Theophanes, 461; Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, INC., 1997), 68-69; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 209; For a detailed account of the dogmatic struggle under Heraclius see J.D.C. Frendo, "Religion and Politics in Byzantium on the Eve of the Arab Conquests" in *Florilegium* 10 (1988-1991), 1-23.

[279] L. Cheikho (ed.). *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus.* Series Tertia-Tomus VI (Arabic) (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico, 1905), Vol.2, 5-6; Elias Khalifeh El-Hachem, "*The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage (5th to 8th century): Churches of the Syriac Tradition: The Maronites*" in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. ed. by Habib Badr and others (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 280-281.

[280] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 218; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 639-641.

lead what was left of it.[281] Bad leadership led eventually to bad results in fighting Muslims.

Thirdly, he compensated for the financial loss of wars by increasing taxes on the people. In AD 630 Heraclius was on his way to Jerusalem to return the Holy Cross back to the Holy City. He stopped in Damascus to demand from its prefect Mansur ben Sarjun[282] the missing annual tribute (djizya/poll-tax) due to the Byzantine authorities. This demand outraged Ibn Sarjun who had just paid the tribute to the Persians before the liberation of Damascus from those same Persians. Heraclius, however, insisted on the payment of one thousand dinars.[283] This story reflects the mutual distrust between the local city leaders and the emperor. It also demonstrates the principle that the cities that were protected or occupied had to pay an annual tribute to the ruling empire. This system was adopted later by the Arab Muslims in what is known as djizya, as part of their relationship with Ahl al-Dhimmah (the protected people). [284]

The situation of the Persian Empire had been no better. The struggle between the Nestorian Church and the Persian emperor had led to feelings of anger and resentment because of the emperor's interference in the Church affairs. The Emperor's interference is seen particularly in the election of their patriarch. When Emperor Khusrau II's suggestion of a patriarch was passed over in AD 605, Khusrau vowed not to confirm any Nestorian patriarch elected to this position till his death. He kept his vow from the death of Gregory I in AD 609 until the year 628. During this vacancy, the Monophysite church got the opportunity to strengthen itself in the Persian Empire. The Monophysites built new churches and replaced the Chalcedonians after they were expelled from the lands newly conquered by Khusrau (AD 605-628) because of their suspected relations with the

[281] Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 221, 227.
[282] The grandfather of St. John of Damascus whose life and writings will be discussed by the end of this chapter.
[283] Cheikho (ed.), *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales,* 5 ; Kaegi, *Héraclius,* 231.
[284] Cahen, Cl.; İnalcık, Halil; Hardy, P. "Ḏjizya". & "Dhimma". *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. 18 January 2011. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0192

Byzantines. In summary, there was a struggle of power and a search for independence between the church and the Persian emperor.[285]

After assessing the situation in the ME at the eve of Islamic military movement to the North of Arabia, it is evident that there were certain factors that played a large role in the fall of the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire and most of the Persian Empire to the Arab/Muslims in the seventh century:

1. There was a vacuum of power in the area. Both empires were exhausted after the long wars in which they had been engaged. The Byzantine emperor, Heraclius made sure to weaken the Persians after his victory in order to secure his empire's eastern borders. He also did not take appropriate measures to investigate the rise to power of any other nations that might threaten his empire.
2. Heraclius failed in his attempts to unify the empire in a single religious and doctrinal direction. In the process of his attempt, he pressured (and persecuted at times) the anti-Chalcedonian Christians in a manner and to a degree that created feelings of resentment towards the Byzantine Empire. The same feeling of anger was present also among those Chalcedonians who themselves opposed the 'Monothelete Compromise' proposed by the Patriarch of Constantinople and adopted by Heraclius.
3. Heraclius' brutal measures against the Jews, his cutting off of financial support from the Arab Christian tribe of Ghassan and other military expenses, and the demand for the payment of annual tribute in such a difficult time, all created feelings of anger among people who, already weary of the Byzantine-Persian war, did not have the will to sacrifice further in defending the imperial authority of Constantinople.
4. The weak Persian empire and its inner struggles had created also a vacuum of power on the Eastern borders with the Byzantine empire.

[285] Hoyland, Seeing *Islam*, 177-178.

At this time, a new wave of conquerors started to swap the area. The information we have for this period comes from sources that need to be re-assessed in terms of legitimacy and accuracy before proceeding with this chapter.

**A necessary note on the sources:**

Assessing the historical sources that cover the period of the Arab/Muslim conquests and the establishment of the first Arab/Muslim caliphate in Damascus is important for understanding what happened from the perspective of those who wrote. Crucially, most of the Islamic historical writings come from a later period of time. There is, in fact, no extant work describing the conquests from an eye-witness perspective. Instead, Islamic sources come mainly from a period when Islamic state and theology (*fiqh*) were well established under the second Islamic dynasty, the Abbasids in Baghdad. Historical works speaking about the time were thus written from a position of power and within a framework different from the original setting of the events, although some writers do claim to be reporting from earlier sources (see Appendix I: The historians of the formative period).[286]

Arabs, before the emergence of Islam, were scattered in tribes all around Arabia and throughout some parts of Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Sinai. They depended mainly on oral tradition that was transmitted and ultimately written down in the form of high and sophisticated poetry and decorative prose. This does not mean that the Arabs were illiterate for there are traces of a high level of literacy to be found among them, but their language and their literary productions were written in different dialects and forms of Arabic scripts following the location of certain Arab tribes such as the Himyarite script in Yemen and the Kufic script in southern Iraq.[287]

The oral tradition was important to Arabs who were fluent in poetry and in decorative prose. Both were easy to memorize and recite, thus it is no wonder that the Qur'an came in

[286] For an introduction to the Islamic sources see Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6-9.
[287] For more detailed discussion on the Arabic literature and/or dialects in pre and post Islamic periods see A.F.L. Beeston & Others (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the end of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 114-115; Enam El-Wer & Rudolf de Dong (eds.), *Arabic Dialectology: In Honor of Clive Holes on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Hitti, Arabs, 90-96.

a highly decorative and musical language. Arabs used to gather every year in cultural and commercial *Suqus* (markets) not only to exchange products, but also to listen to poetry competitions and even to sermons by eloquent speakers. Arabic sources reported Muhammad attending *Suqu Ukath*, which was one of these market events where he listened to a sermon from Quss[288] ben Sa'ida of Iyad who was believed to be a Christian bishop.[289] These markets were an opportunity to share religious views and preaching as part of cultural exchange among the different Arab tribes.

Complete works written in Arabic language were rare before Islam. They were mainly long poems/odes that were hung on the Ka'ba in Mecca.[290] The earliest complete book written in the Arabic language might have been the Qur'an itself. This would explain the high value of the Qur'an not only as a founding text[291] of the religion of Islam but also as a landmark in the formation of Arab identity and the unification of the Arab tribes under the leadership of Muhammad. Despite the fact that Arabs had different accents and dialects, the Qur'an was written down entirely in the one Quryish dialect, the dialect of Muhammad's own tribe. This single language of the Qur'an become a unifying factor among the Arabs under Islam and the means of better communication and understanding among them.

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[288] 'Quss' or 'Qassis' is a title given usually to priests/pastors in the Middle East till today.

[289] Irfan Shahid, "Islam and Oriens Christianus: Makka 610-622 AD" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* edited by E. Grypeou, M. Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 21, 24-26, 28.

[290] Ibid., 111-113.

[291] Although the codification of the Qur'an as a unified and final text was established at the time of the third caliph, Uthman, the Qur'an as a memorized text, in addition to other factors, played a definite role in unifying the Arab tribes around Muhammad in Medina particularly. See for example Fred Donner, "The historical Context" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30-31; Claude Gilliot, "Creation of a Fixed Text" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Theodore Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans* (*Tarikeh al-Qur'an*). Trans. by George Tamer (Auflage/Beirut :Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2004); Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1998).

## Surviving early Muslim historical books

A chart by Robinson[292] shows that the earliest surviving Islamic book of history is the *Biography of Muhammad* by Ibn Ishaq (d.151AH[293]/776AD), which was abridged by Ibn Hisham (d. 213/834). The first book documenting the *Maghazi* (battles/conquests) was by al-Waqidi (d. 207/823). Documenting conquests was followed by a tradition of writing biographies of the Muslim caliphs and 'ulma' (scholars). This biographical tradition started with Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/851). The development in the historical writings by Muslim historians took several decades until culminating in al-Blathuri's complete history of the *Futuh al-Buldan.*[294] Al-Balathuri (d. 279/892) was a resident of Baghdad of Persian descent. He depended to some extent on the historical books written before him such as al-Waqidi, but mostly on oral traditions. The Arab/Muslim writings used *Isnad*[295] as a unique way of documentation. The most comprehensive historian to write after al-Balathuri was al-Tabari (d. 310/923) and then al-Mas`udi (d. 346/957). One other important surviving history is by Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam (d. 257/870), which described *Futuh Misr* (The Conquests of Egypt).[296] These are some, though not all, of the important extant historical books.

These historical writings emerged after the normative traditions such as the Qur'an and the prophetic *Hadith* reached their near-complete form. Political power was established and the theological *Mathahib*[297] were beginning to be influential in the society against the background of both the intense political struggle between the Sunnis and Shii's and the continuous struggle with the Byzantine Empire over the frontier cities. Muslim historians were probably reflecting their theological and political understanding of the events with a

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[292] Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiv-xv.
[293] A.H means the Hijra Islamic period and from now on, all dates will indicate the Hijra calendar first and the Christian era last.
[294] The Conquests of Countries.
[295] *Isnad* depended on a long chain of people who were believed to be trusted sources of information. Those people transmitted the stories about the prophets, caliphs and their achievements orally till they assumed written form.
[296] Philip Hitti (trans. & ed.) *The origins of the Islamic State being a translation of Kitab Futuh al-Buldan by al-Baladuri* (NY: Columbia University, 1916), 1-11; see also John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment and Servanthood* ( Berkeley: California University Press, 2008), 1-9; Nadia El-Cheik, Women, 6-9.
[297] Islamic Theological Schools.

retrospective attitude. Nonetheless, Muslim historians had been exposed to the larger society in the main cities of the new world ruled by Muslims. This exposure put them in direct contact with Christians, Jews, and other religious groups. Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids, was a centre of philosophical and religious schools. Major historical works were composed in Baghdad within this environment. It was also a period when the Christian-Muslim polemical and apologetic writings were negotiated at a high level, sometimes aggressively. The validity of Islam was discussed as was the prophethood of Muhammad, and Christian doctrines that contradicted Islam.[298] This raises the question as to whether the Muslim historical writings were intentionally polemical. It seems that they were written to defend the Islamic religion and validate the conquests on religious grounds. They were also written to promote Islam as the final and valid 'religion' of God.[299]

When reading these histories, it is also worth considering what Hudhayfe ibn al-Yaman, a companion of the Prophet, says about the Arab attitude to reporting: "We Arab people; when we report, we predate and postdate, we add and we subtract [information]at will, but we do not mean to lie".[300] This confirms the nature of Arab oral tradition and how it was transmitted in decorative prose or sophisticated poetry, allowing for some 'additions' to the original event. That is why Muslim historians depended on *Isnad* to document their writings; they wanted to listen to more than one story to get to the core of what had happened. This style of documentation was followed by those who gathered the *Prophetic Tradition* (the Hadith), a source of controversy among Muslims to the present day. Some

[298] For a good summary of these apologetics see Sidney Griffith, "The Prophet Muhammad: His Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century" in *The Life of Muhammad* edited by Uri Rubin (Alders hot: Ashgate/ Variorum, 1998), 345-392; Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims: A Critical Analysis of Christian Presentation of Christ for Muslims from the Ninth and Twentieth Centuries* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2005).

[299] It is noticeable in the Islamic resources that the Christian stories are related from a Muslim point of view and how the stories of Jesus were presented in the Qur'an, see for example Moshe Perlmann (Trans. & Annot.), *The History of al-Tabari (Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk), Vol. IV, The Ancient Kingdoms* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1987), 113-125; Al-Ya'qubi was the only Muslim historian to present Jesus by using Christian canonical books, for that see Sidney Griffith, "The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh" in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* edited by John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 133-160.

[300] J. Berkey, The Formation of Islam, 58.

hadiths are considered by some Muslim scholars as not 'trustworthy' and therefore offering no worthy basis upon which to build action or teaching.[301]

All these influences on the objectivity of those historians cannot be ignored. On the contrary, these influences must be appreciated in order to understand these historical writings and the intentions behind them.

## Christian historians of the period of the conquests

From the other side we have some early Christian chroniclers who wrote as early as the time of the Arab conquests of their lands. They interpreted these conquests mostly in a theological manner, using biblical metaphors, apocalyptic and prophetic language. Their attitude is conditioned by the fact that most of the Christian writers were clergy. This tradition continued at least until the twelfth century.

Andrew Palmer has collected, reconstructed, translated, introduced and annotated most of the surviving Syriac Chronicles in one volume in *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles.*[302] He also includes the two seventh-century Syriac apocalyptic texts.[303] These chronicles and apocalyptic writings reflect the Christian understanding of the Muslim Conquest and early Christian-Muslim relations in the seventh century. The other chronicle from this period is *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu,*[304] which covers the Arab conquest of Egypt. The comprehensive Greek chronicle comes from the ninth century from the author Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818).[305]

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[301] Jamal al-Banna, *Tajreed al-Bukhari wa Muslim mina al-Ahadeth al-lati la Tulzeem* (Purify the Hadith books of Bukhari and Muslim from the un-compulsory / unnecessary prophetic tradition) ( Cairo: Da'wat al-Ihia al-Islami, -).

[302] Andrew Palmer (Trans. & Ann.), *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993).

[303] Translated and annotated by Sebastian Brock.

[304] R.H. Charles (Trans. & Introd.), *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu: Translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic Text* (NJ: Evolution publishing, 2007).

[305] Cyril Mango & Roger Scott (eds.), *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

The importance of these chronicles comes from the fact that most of them were most probably written by eye witnesses or within a short time of what had happened. The Christian interpretation of Arab/Muslim conquests and their early rule was expressed in sermons, apocalyptic writings, and polemics.[306] These writings were produced mainly in Syriac, Coptic, Greek, and Armenian. The attitude toward Muslims varies in these writings as will be discussed. This variation of attitude and interpretation is due to the various geographical, social, political and, most importantly, the internal Christian sectarian circumstances at the time of the conquest.

There are also other Christian historians who developed their own understanding and interpretation of Islam at a later stage when the Islamic religion and political sovereignty was well established. Some of these surviving Chronicles are written by Sa'id ibn al-Batriq (d. 328/839), Michael the Syrian (d.596 /1199), and Eutyches ibn al-Muqafa' (d. 377/987) in the Arabic language, the language of the socio-political system of the Islamic Caliphate at the time. Because of this, they were available to the wider Arab/Muslim community also, while the earlier writings were not, being written in languages other than Arabic by Christians to their respective Christian communities.

## Why Arab Muslims started the conquests

Western scholars have offered several interpretations of the phenomena of Arab/Muslim conquests.[307] The main reasons given for the conquests vary and there is no consensus among western scholars in this regard. While William Muir, for example, explained it as a consequence of 'mass migration' of the Arab people and their love to plunder and seize the goods of others, other scholars understood the conquest as a migration to escape hunger in the dry desert. Scholars such as Leon Caetini and Carl Heinirich Becker conclude that Islam as a religion played a secondary role in this movement. For them, hunger was a

[306] For exclusive presentation & discussion of these writings see Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it: A survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1997).

[307] Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3-9 summarizes these views starting from late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries; Donner has collected the works of most of these views in one volume: Fred Donner (ed.), *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2008).

greater force behind the conquests. Other scholars saw in the conquest a search for new trade markets and roads. Fred Donner proposed that:

> Muhammad's career and the doctrines of Islam revolutionized both the ideological bases and the political structures of Arabian society, giving rise for the first time to a state capable of organizing and executing an expansionist movement.[308]

Donner dismisses such reasons as hunger, dry lands, trade expansion or over-population, since the Arab mass migration happened after the conquests.

Although I agree with Donner's dismissal of the reasons proposed by the earlier scholars, I think that the early Arab/Muslim conquest cannot be built on the Islamic doctrines only as Donner proposes. At the time of the conquests, the Qur'an was not yet compiled, nor was the prophetic tradition and Islamic theology yet developed. Moreover, some Muslim historical accounts show that Arab Muslim soldiers and sometimes their leaders were ignorant of the Qur'an and its teachings at the time of the conquests.[309] One cannot deny, however, the powerful spiritual motivation that Islam (in terms of unity and belief in One God) gave to the Arabs in their endeavour.

To understand the reasons behind the Arab/Muslim conquests, we need to consider the socio-political situation in Arabia before the conquests and how the Muslim historians presented them. After the death of Muhammad in AD 632, the new Muslim community faced two challenges. The first was the challenge of leadership as Muhammad did not appoint a definite successor before his death; the second was an economic-political and religious challenge that came to be known as the '*Riddah Wars'*.[310]

The issue of leadership of the Muslim community was solved quickly, but not finally, when Abu Bakr was elected to be the Prophet's caliph (successor).[311] The debate about this election in the absence of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali ben Abi Talib,

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[308] Donner, *Conquests*, 8.
[309] Nöldeke, *History of the Qur'an*, 242-3.
[310] Wars launched by Muslims against the tribes that apostate from Islam after the death of Muhammad.
[311] Kung, *Islam*, 163-164.

intensified during the following years leading to two civil wars among the Muslims and ending in the creation of two Muslim major sects: Sunnis and Shi'ites.[312]

The second challenge was the *Riddah* Wars against the apostatizing tribes. After the death of Muhammad, some Arab tribes who had submitted to Muhammad's leadership of Arabia as part of their allegiance treaties with him decided to go back to their previous traditions, religions and independence. They considered the treaty with Muhammad, the king of the Arabs, no longer valid. They stopped paying the annual tribute and did not recognize Abu Bakr as his Caliph. Moreover, some members of these tribes started to initiate prophetic movements similar to Muhammad's.[313] Abu Bakr led wars against these tribes to return them to the allegiance treaty with Muhammad on the basis that their allegiance was not to Muhammad as a person or a king only, but to Allah and Muhammad as his prophet. Abu Bakr led these wars after delivering his famous speech: "Whoever was worshipping Muhammad, let it be known that Muhammad died; and whoever was worshipping Allah, Allah is alive and does not die". [314] Abu Bakr wanted Arabs to keep their allegiance to Allah and Islam not to the diseased prophet.

He also expressed concern at the drying up of the tribute that was due from these tribes. These two reasons, namely the issues of political/religious and financial submission to the new Muslim leadership, raise the awareness of the real reasons behind the *Riddah* wars and the following wars of expansion.

The *Riddah* gives the impression that Arab 'Muslim' tribes of Arabia were not aware of the faith and the religion of Islam in the first place. If they were not aware of their faith, why did these tribes apostatize from the faith and want to create their own prophetic tradition? Was the *Riddah*, for abu Bakr, a denial of the faith in the prophecy of

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[312] Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 70.
[313] Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32; Kung, *Islam*, 162.
[314] Albert Hourani, *Tarikh Al-Sho'uob al-'Arabia* (The History of Arab Peoples) (Cairo: Al-Haya' al-Masriyyah al-'Ammah ll-Kitab, 1997), 53; Abu Ja'far al-Tabri, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (The History of the Messengers and Kings) edited by Muhammad Ibrahim (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1962), Vol III, 249-50. Al-Tabri in these two pages record what it might be the long discourse sent to the apostatizing tribes by Abu Baker.

Muhammad only or was it a breaking-up of the new Arab unity under Islam? Was Abu Bakr's concern religious only, based on returning the apostatized tribes to Islam? It seems that his concern was to keep the unity of the *Ummah* (the community of faith) under the unifying factor of Islam. The dream of unity among Arabs was realized under Muhammad's leadership. Abu Bakr could not allow the dream to vanish.

## Interpretation by Muslim historians of the Arab/Muslim conquests, their circumstances and the motivations behind them

'Ali Dashti, a modern Iranian Shi'ite historian, argues that the Arab/Muslim conquests achieved three main goals. Firstly, they ended the *Riddah* movement by uniting the Arabs again, with their focus on one single goal. Secondly, they employed the military abilities of the Bedouins to achieve this goal. Thirdly, they empowered the new leadership with new income through the booty. All these factors played a role in sustaining the unity of the new Muslim community.[315] Dashti explains that the aim of Muhammad and the Caliphs who succeeded him was to unite the Arabs and employ their abilities as one nation under the religion of Islam. The war-like spirit of the Arabs and their regular raids upon the developed areas around Arabia seeking booty and food were only too well known. Dashti agrees that Islam was not in the first place meant to be a universal religion but rather a local religion of the Arabs.[316]

'Ali Dashti in his proposal contradicts the trend of thought of most of the Muslim historians documenting that period. The Muslim historians wrote, as we saw earlier, under the 'Abbasid rule in Baghdad after 750 AD. Their writings endorsed and propagated the Muslim-developed thinking about Islam as a universal religion. For them, the aim of the conquests had been to spread Islam among the peoples of the earth. An interesting passage from al-Waqidi's (d. 823) history of *Futuh al-Sham* clarifies this perspective. This passage

[315] 'Ali Dashti, *23 'Aman: Dirasah fi al-Sira al-Nabawia al-Muhammadyya* (Twenty Three Years: A Study in the Prophetic Career of Muhammad) translated from Persian into Arabic by Tha'er Deeb (Damascus: Petra Publications, 2004), 241-244; Lapidus, 32.
[316] Dashti, *23 Years*, 241-244.

is part of Abu Bakr's charge command to the Arab/Muslim armies whom he sent to fight *al-Rum* (the Byzantines) at the beginning of the conquests:

> If you have got victory over your enemies, you shall kill neither a new-born baby, nor an old man, nor a woman nor a child; you shall not corrupt palm trees, burn plants, or cut fruitful trees; don't slaughter an animal unless for food. You shall not break your treaties and peace pacts [that you sign]. You will pass by people in their hermitages, they are monks who claim to be dedicated to God, leave them as they are, satisfied with what they are doing. You shall not kill them or destroy their places of solitude. [However,] you will find other people; they are the devil's party, the worshippers of the crosses. Those have shaved the middle of their heads to expose their skulls [Tonsures]; raise your swords against their heads till they return to [accept] Islam or pay the djizya 'with willing submission and feel themselves subdued'.[317]

Differentiating between two types of Christians in this passage shows clearly how the tense political situation between the Muslims and Byzantium influenced the early Muslim historians at the time. Al-Waqidi (d.208/823) wrote his work when caliph al-Ma'mun (AH 198-218/AD 813-833) was in power. The rule of al-Ma'mun witnessed openness toward different kinds of sciences and translations. He established the House of Wisdom in Baghdad (*Beit al-Hikma*). However, his rule was also a period of internal and external struggles. At this time one of the conservative trends of Islam was born of the theological efforts of Ahmad ben Hanbal, the founder of one of the four Islamic schools (madthab).[318] It might be that politics and conservative Islamic teachings are behind al-Waqidi's historical account.

Al-Waqidi in this passage clearly wanted to show that Muslim armies had started their conquests for purely religious reasons: Islam or dijizia for the "worshippers of the cross". They were concerned to offer Islam or djizya as the only two options next to war by the sword to the non-Muslims regardless of their ethnic affiliation. For al-Waqidi, spreading Islam was both the reason and the motivation behind the conquests. However, it is clear

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[317] Al-Waqidi, *The Conquests of Syria* (Futuh al-Sham) edited by W. Nassau Lees (Calcutta: F. Carbery, Bengal Military orphan Press, 1854), 7-8. Quating the Qur'an 9:29.

[318] P.M. Holt & Others (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. I, the Central Islamic Lands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 118-124.

also that al-Waqidi is differentiating between two groups of monks: the eastern monks in their hermitages on the verge of the desert and the Byzantine monks who had tonsures by shaving the middle of their heads, a tradition that was never applied in the eastern churches. Tolerating the monks in their hermitages was a Muslim duty. Those monks were not forced to accept Islam, pay djizya or fight for their faith. They were already dedicated to worship God. On the other hand, Muslim fighters had only three choices to offer to the 'chaplains' of the Byzantine armies who were attacking the frontier cities between the two empires at the time. They were considered 'the devil's party' and the 'worshippers of the crosses'. This account was written at a time when Islam was considered to be a religion offered to all. Al-Waqidi established his case on the Qur'anic text from 9:29, which became the basis of the Muslim treatment of *Ahl al-Dhimmah*.[319] The confusion al-Waqidi expressed in his account is due to the later development of the Islamic historiography that was reflecting specific circumstances, i.e. the Muslim-Byzantine conflict over the frontier towns. It also reflects the retrospective attitude of the Muslim historians in interpreting the early Muslim conquests in terms of 'jihad' and 'spreading of Islam' among the nations, a concept that developed at a later stage in Islamic history. The importance of al-Waqidi's account comes from the fact that he was quoted extensively by later Muslim historians such as al-Balathuri and al-Tabari.

The other important tradition about the Islamic motivation to preach Islam to non-Arabs comes from the biography of Muhammad composed by Ibn Ishaq AD 761. It survives in an abridged copy produced by Ibn Hisham (d. AD 835). This biography, which cannot be taken to be entirely historical, reported that Prophet Muhammad composed letters and sent them to the kings and emperors calling them to Islam. It is interesting how the biographer told stories about the reaction of Heraclius to the message of Muhammad. Heraclius believed in Muhammad's prophethood, accepted Islam as predicted by the Christian scriptures, and advised his army generals to submit to Muhammad's leadership as the apostle of God. But the 'Roman/*al-Rum*' army generals rejected Heraclius's proposal.

[319] The question might be asked here is: was this verse used in the original event or was it applied to the situation later on? It is not clear if this verse is used to verify the djizya on religious/theological basis rather than confessing that 'djizya' was adopted by Muslims from other ruling powers in the region previously.

Heraclius admitted to the messenger of Muhammad at the end of the meeting: "Alas, I know that your master is a prophet sent (by God) and that it is he whom we expect and find in our book, but I go in fear of my life from the Romans; but for that I will follow him".[320]

On the other hand, there is a strong tradition showing that early Muslims had understood the new religion to be the religion of the Arabs only. The Unity of the Arabs under Islam was the crucial issue in the mind of the Muslim leaders. This is evident in the actions and policy of the first Arab Muslims who led the Conquests. This target became clearer under the leadership of 'Umar ben al- Khatab ('Umar I 634-644) who was elected as the second Caliph when Abu Bakr died after almost two years of his caliphate. Arab Muslims under Umar's leadership sought to convert all Arabs to Islam in order to keep the unity of the nation and to employ their fighting abilities toward their enemies. Some incidents shed light on this Muslim concern to unite Arabs under one religion and leadership.

When Khalid ben al-Waleed arrived in al-Hira during the first wave of conquests he called on the Arab tribes there to accept Islam on the basis that Islam was the religion of the Arabs.[321] Moreover, 'Umar I ordered all the Christians in Arabia to leave for Syria if they did not embrace Islam. He wanted to convert the Iyad Christian tribe to Islam. When the Iyad fled to Byzantium, 'Umar threatened Byzantium that he would expel all the Christians in the Levant if the Byzantines did not send them back. 'Umar I considered the flight of Iyad to be a threat to the unity of the Arabs and was afraid that Byzantium would use them to fight against the Arab Muslims.[322]

When Arab Muslims continued their expansions to the north under 'Umar I, he also agreed not to treat the Taghlib, the large Christian Arab tribe, as *Dhimmis* even though they refused to embrace Islam and to pay al-djizya. He asked them to pay the double rate of

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[320] Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 652- 657.See also the following pages, 657-559, they report Muhammad's messengers to the other kings in the region including the Persian shah.
[321] Al-Balathuri, *Futuh*, 50; Salwa al-'Ayeb, *Al-Masihyya al-'Arabia wa Tatouratiha* (The Arab Christianity and its Developments from the beginning to 4th AH/10th AD Centuries) (Beirut: Dar al-Talia'a, 1995), 149.
[322] Al-Balathuri, *Futuh*, 50; Hitti, *Arabs*,169.

Muslim *Sadaqa* (religious tribute) and not the poll-tax (djizya). (Muslims applied the later system of poll-tax to all the people they conquered.) Arab tribes had two choices only: to accept Islam or fight. But 'Umar I resigned himself to this arrangement with the Taghlib when he was warned by his helpers not to anger the Taghlib in case they took up arms against the Muslims as 'enemies' in war. These astute counsels took into account the greater numbers and strength of the Taghlib and the extent of their territories to the north of Iraq. Taghlib remained a Christian tribe till the tenth century.[323]

These examples confirm that Islam was in the first place a socio-political and religious treaty or system between Muhammad and Arabs only. The unity of the Arab *Ummah* was the goal of Islam and the conquests were the means to keep this unity intact. The compelling question here is: did the Arab Muslims offer three options to the non-Arab populations who were the residents of the major cities in the Levant and Egypt? Were the three alternatives, Islam as priority, djizya or war, realistic? If the aim was to convert people to Islam, in the belief that their religion was a universal religion, why was there a possibility of choice?

Muslim later traditions discussed this offer because their aim was to propagate Islam as a universal religion and to convince later generations that the early conquests were for purely religious reasons. On the other hand, the early Christian historians do not even mention the Arab Muslim offer. Propagating Islam, as a motive, is not stable in all cases and accounts. In fact, early Muslim historians such as Al-Balathuri, al-Tabari, and al-Waqidi did not record this offer in the case of the people of Damascus for example. The historical account of al-Tabari,[324] who used most of the historical traditions from before his time, does not mention this offer of Islam to the people of Damascus. The concerns that were expressed in these accounts were to defeat the Byzantine army, get the booty, enforce the *djizya* and make a peace treaty with the people. In doing this, Arab Muslims followed the example of the Persians in their conquests. The peace treaties that the Arab/Muslims

[323] Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 54-55. Abu Youssef, *Kitab al-Kharaj* (The book of Land Tax) (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'arifa, 1979), 120-121. Abu Youssef stated the circumstances and the rules that led to this special treatment of Taghlib.
[324] Al-Tabari, History, 439-440.

offered to the cities usually emphasized the security of the Christian churches, crosses, and clergy in addition to freedom of worship. The best example of these treaties is what is known as *al-'Uhda al-'Umaria* (the Umar Pact) that was granted to Jerusalem and its patriarch Sophronius in AD 636 [325] (Appendix II, Map of the East: Syria and Mesopotamia). In this regard, it is valid to argue that the call to Islam was confined solely to the Arabs on the basis of creating a national unity among the Arabs.

A Christian historian from the mid-Abbasid Period, Sa'id ben al Batriq (d. 328 AH/839 AD), was one of the early historians who documented the concept of the Islamic three-alternative offer. He recorded the discussion between 'Amr ben al-'As, the Arab commander who conquered Palestine and Egypt, with Cyrus, Egypt's ruler and Melkite patriarch. 'Amr offered one of three solutions to the Byzantine army and its commander before the Muslims invaded the *Babylon Fortress* near Alexandria: 'You either enter our religion, pay the Djizya or suffer war and death'.[326] Ibn al-Batriq, as the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, might have intended to condemn Cyrus's choice. Cyrus chose to pay the djizya to the Muslims as the least damaging among the three options. This agreement was breached later when Heraclius deposed Cyrus as a traitor and appointed another commander over Egypt. The new commander refused to pay the djizya to the Arabs the following year, a foolish decision that led the Arabs to attack Egypt and conquer its Byzantine armies. Ibn al-Batriq accused Cyrus of being a Jacobite at heart who submitted his will to the Arabs.[327] The other reason behind ibn al-Batriq's story might have been to spread the propaganda that the religion of Islam was spread by the sword from the beginning, for this was a time when the process of Arabization and Islamization of the Middle East, including Egypt, was starting to intensify. It is also possible that Ibn al-Batriq was influenced by the new Muslim awareness of the value of conquering these areas for religious, and not financial or military-political, goals.

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[325] Yohanan Friedmann (Trans.) *The History of al-Tabari, Vol.XII, The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine* (NY: State University of NY Press, 1992), 191-2

[326] L. Cheikho (ed.), *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* in *Scriptores Arabici Textus.* Series Tertia-Tomus VI (Arabic) (Beirut: E Typograheo Catholico, 1905), Vol. 2, 10.

[327] Ibid., 22.

The other concern is the barrier of language. The majority of the inhabitants of the conquered areas were Syriac/Greek or Coptic/Greek speaking populations. It is not clear in the accounts how the Arabs were able to communicate with the leaders of those areas/cities they conquered. There is one mention of an interpreter between Sophronius and 'Umar I when Jerusalem was conquered by the Arabs.[328]

It is also notable that the Muslim historians did not mention mass conversions happening after the conquests. If they really happened, why did they not provide the readers with approximate numbers and some names of notables in certain cities as examples of the converted people?

The arguments presented above show that the majority of the Arab/Muslim fighters were probably not fully aware of their own religion or that they were not concerned to preach Islam to non-Arabs. The text of the Qur'an was not as yet assembled and Islamic theology not yet developed.[329] Moreover, the people who memorized the Qur'an were few as most of them died in battle. This gave rise to the suggestion that a standard version of the Qur'an should be collected from the verses kept on "bones, animal skins and in the chests of people".[330] But this raises yet further questions: Were the Arabs/Muslims aware of their religious stand over against the Cross and the Christological issues when they entered those Christian areas? If so, why did they offer the Christians security (*Aman*) for their crosses, churches and clergy, alongside their personal security and protection? Were the treaties made with the 'Christian' areas political only? It appears that the lack of information, the process of Islamic identity formation and the political-financial motives behind the conquests resulted in a pact being made with the Christians in the conquered cities to protect their religious symbols as well. There is no indication in these conquest accounts of a real religious drive to convert the non-Arab people to Islam. Islam as a religion was driven by a desire for unity among the Arabs at that stage. It is only later

[328] Ibid., 19.
[329] Jason Dean, "Outbidding Catholicity: Early Islamic Attitudes toward Christians and Christianity" in *Exchange* 38 (2009), 201-225 discusses in details and clear charts how the Muslim early writings, namely the Qur'an, Hadith and the Sira tradition, developed in their understanding of Christians and Christianity throughout the years and how this development was translated into social and political attitudes/actions.
[330] Kung, *Islam*, 179-180.

Islamic chronicles that described the conquests within the framework of the 'spreading of Islam' motive.[331] It makes sense to conclude that Muslim scholars developed in later years the notion of Islam as a universal religion to be spread among the nations. This development might well have been the result of the interaction with Christians in the conquered regions. Christianity was a universal religion that was adopted by many nations and was able to adapt to different traditions and languages in the region. That context might have opened Muslim eyes in regard to developing their understanding of Islam as a universal religion too.

This interpretation of the Arab conquests by the later Muslim historians, namely the spreading of Islam by force as a target of the invading armies, has been taken up selectively by some later and modern historians/writers. These modern writers challenge the 'tolerance' of the Arab/Muslim conquerors. Their selection of individual stories wrenched from their larger context does not do justice to the fullness and complexity of that context.[332]

## Interpretation by early Christian writers of the Arab/Muslim Conquest

The Christian chronicles did not understand or describe the Arab/Muslim conquest within its Islamic framework. Instead, the conquest was perceived from within their Christian point of view. For the early Christian historians, it was Arabs – understood in ethnic and tribal terms – not Muslims – understood in religious terms – who conquered their lands, in order to fulfill certain divine purposes. The Christian writers expressed in general a 'welcoming' attitude toward the Arabs and found in them a liberating power. The Christians in Syria, Iraq and Egypt for instance, had suffered under pressures from the Byzantine and Persian powers, as we have seen earlier.

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[331] See, for example, how the Muslim historians developed certain 'propaganda' issues concerning Byzantium at certain stage in order to protect their people and the unity of the Islamic Ummah in Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[332] See for example Robert Spencer (ed.), *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law treats non-Muslims* (NY: Prometheus Books, 2005); Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: from Jihad to Dhimmitude* translated from French by Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

Christian leaders did not report incidents of Muslims forcing Christians to embrace Islam as their new religion. It is noticeable that most of the writings and sermons of the Christian leaders at this time were not directed to convincing the Christians to return to the Christian faith or to urging them not to convert to the new faith. Rather, the caution in these writings was not to lose heart because of this 'barbarian attack,'[333] but to repent and depend on God's vindication. This call to repentance was the consequence of the pains of war the people of the region had suffered for a long time.

There is also no indication that these writings were known to the Muslim community or ruling class. The fact that they were written in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and Greek means that they were directed to Christian communities rather than to the Muslim community or leadership. There is also no proof that Muslim theologians or historians responded to these early Christian works. The credibility of these writings comes from that fact that they were written from different theological and sectarian stands, with their consequent different interpretations.[334]

The Christian writers interpreted the Arab-Muslim conquest in theological terms in four ways:

**1. The conquests happened by God's will and command.**

John Bar Penkaya, a Nestorian monk, writing in his world history in the 680s wondered how 'naked men, riding without armor or shield' could win over the powerful Persians.[335] He says:

> We should not think of the advent (of the children of Hagar) as something ordinary, but as due to divine working. Before calling them, (God) had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honor; thus they also had a special commandment from God

[333] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 77.
[334] For detailed study of the Christian writings, their writers, theological stand and geographical region see Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (*NJ*: The Darwin Press, 1997).
[335] Sebastian Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology* (Hampshire:Variorum/Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1992), 58.

> concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honor.[336]

Dionysius of Tel-Mahre,[337] a Jacobite historian and patriarch from 818-845 AD who wrote in Syriac, agrees with Bar Penkaya.[338] For Dionysius, it is God who chooses who is to be ruler. [339]

> God, who exacts his due and who determines sovereignty among people on earth, will give power to whom He chooses. He may appoint even the dregs of mankind to be their rulers. When He saw that the measure of the Romans' sins was overflowing and that they were committing every sort of crime against our people and our churches, bringing our confession to the verge of extinction, He stirred up the Sons of Ishmael and enticed them hither from their southern land. This had been the most despised and disregarded of all peoples of the earth, if indeed they were known at all. Yet it was by bargaining with them that we secured our deliverance. This was no small gain, to be secured from the Roman imperial oppression.[340]

In this passage, Dionysius joins Bar Penkaya in wondering how this 'lowly' nation could conquer great nations and armies such as the Persians and Byzantines. It was after all God's will to use those people whom they called the 'Sons of Ishmael and Hagar' for God's purposes and by His command. These writers introduced the Arab (and not Muslim) conquest in Biblical terms. Dionysius also admitted that the Christian people, and maybe the church, negotiated the handing over of the cities to the Arabs in order to secure the deliverance of the local church from the imperial church. This deliverance comes under God's will despite the human participation in making it happen. Dionysius and Bar Penkaya did not forget to claim the Syriac supremacy over the Arabs whom they considered 'despised,' 'disregarded,' and 'naked,' although they linked them in different parts of their chronicles to Ishmael and Hagar.

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[336] Ibid., 57.
[337] His work was written in two parts, the *Church History* and the *Secular History*, covering the period from 582-842 AD.
[338] Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 85. Palmer reconstituted the two parts of Dionysius' history in one volume relying on the later chronicles written by the Jacobite/Monophysite patriarch Michael (d. 1199) and from *The Anonymous Chronicle 1234 AD.*
[339] Ibid., 111.
[340] Ibid., 141.

**2. The rise of the Arabs is the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham through Ishmael.**

This time it is God fulfilling his promises to Ishmael, Abraham's son from Hagar as it is recorded in Gen. 21: 12-13, 18. God's promise was to make of Ishmael 'a great nation'. The Armenian bishop, Sebeos, expressed this view in his writings around AD 661 when he referred to Prophet Muhammad as: "Being very learned and well-versed in the Law of Moses, he taught them [the Arabs] to know the God of Abraham". As a result, the Arabs rose as children of Ishmael to realize the promise of God to Abraham.[341]

**3. The Conquests are God's punishment to the Christians because of their sins and divisions.**

This notion might be the earliest interpretation of the Arab/Muslim Conquests. It was expressed in the sermons and writings of the Chalcedonians mainly, blaming the Monophysite and Monothelete 'heresies'. Sophronius was the patriarch of Jerusalem (Pat. 633/4-639 AD) and he was the one who surrendered Jerusalem to the Arab Muslims in AD 638, a bare few months before he died. Sophronius in his Christmas sermon about four years earlier had expressed sadness and anger because the Christians of Jerusalem were not able to go on their annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem, due to the occupation of the town and its surroundings by the Arab armies, which he called the 'Saracens'.[342] He used this title again in his Synodical letter.[343] Sophronius seemed unaware of the new religion or its prophet, Muhammad. Therefore, he saw in the Arab invasion a divine punishment of the church because of its sins. This notion is more obvious in Sophronius' sermon on Epiphany 637 AD. He uses apocalyptic language in this sermon to describe the Arabs as a representation of the 'abomination of Desolation' that was predicted by the Prophet Daniel (9:27; 11:31; 12:11; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). Sophronius in this later sermon reflects

[341] Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 35; Tolan, Saracens, 45.
[342] John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 127-8 explains the origins of the term Saracens. The main meaning is 'pagan'.
[343] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 69.

some awareness of the Arab theological stand over against Christian doctrines when he accused Muhammad, without naming him, of being the devil, especially when he says:

> Why do barbarians' raids abound? Why are the troops of the Saracens attacking us? ...Why have churches been pulled down? Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by the pagan mouths so that he justly cries out to us: "Because of you my name is blasphemed among the pagans [Saracens]," and this is the worst of all the terrible things that are happening to us. That is why the vengeful and God-hating Saracens, the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries … Moreover, they are raised up more and more against us and increase their blasphemy of Christ and the church, and utter wicked blasphemies against God. These God-fighters boast of prevailing over all, assiduously and unrestrainedly imitating their leader, who is the devil.[344]

Sophronius understood these Muslim attacks as punishment aimed to chastise the church at a time of division and inter-church debate regarding the Monothelete heresy that he opposed. It is clear in his sermons that Sophronius did not ask the people to fight back, but rather to accept the will of God by repentance and reform. It was Christians' fault. They were not faithful to Christ whose name and Cross were defiled because of their sins. It is important to mention that the description of destruction that Sophronius provided has no strong archeological evidence.[345]

Sophronius' sermons do not reflect the way he welcomed the caliph, 'Umar, into Jerusalem. Others' reports about the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem show that Sophronius welcomed Caliph 'Umar into Jerusalem, offering him new clothes and asking him to pray in the Holy Sepulcher. Moreover, there are no reports of Muslim armies destroying churches in Jerusalem when they entered.[346]

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[344] Ibid., 72-3.
[345] Alan Guenther, "The Christian Experience and Interpretation of the Early Muslim Conquest and Rule" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 3/10 (1999), 366.
[346] L. Cheikho, *Eutychii*, Vol. 2, 17-19.

Sophronius' writings were, moreover, in Greek. They were directed to his own community. His aim might have been to encourage his people in a time of uncertainty. His use of Greek language might have affected the later Byzantine view of Islam and early Arab/Muslim conquests. Theophanes seemed to quote Sophronius' sermons without giving many details about 'Umar's entrance to Jerusalem.[347]

Maximus the Confessor[348] (d. 662) shared Sophronius' views. He described Arabs as "barbarian invaders" and blamed their conquest on the sins of the Christians:

> What is more terrifying, I say, for the eyes and ears of Christians than to see a cruel and alien nation authorized to raise its hand against the divine inheritance? But it is the multitude of sins committed by us that has allowed this.[349]

Maximus hints at the Muslim religious character by identifying them as 'Jewish people'. For him, Arabs thought they worshipped God while they did not. By doing this they prepared the way for the advent of the anti-Christ.[350] It is not clear, however, if he meant by 'Jewish people' a people in relation to Jewish-Christianity.

St. Anastasius of Sinai[351] showed greater awareness of Islam and the Qur'an. He composed a book titled *Hodegos* (Guide), which is a manual of heresies and their refutation from the Chalcedonian point of view. His main target was the Monophysite faith. However, he showed awareness of the 'false notions' of the Arabs about Christianity.[352] In his attack on the Monophysite doctrines, he linked Monophysite resistance to the Chalcedonian faith with what Arabs were avoiding concerning Christological issues:[353]

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[347] Mango & Scott, The Chronicle of Theophanes, 471-2.
[348] Maximus died in North Africa before the beginning of the Umayyad rule in Damascus. He was a student of Sophronius and was therefore opposed to the 'heresy' of Monotheletism.
[349] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 78.
[350] Guenther, "The Christian Experience and Interpretation", 367.
[351] A Cypriot native, (d. 700 AD) who came from St. Catharine Monastery on Mount Sinai.
[352] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 94-5; Sidney H. Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims" in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 4/32 (1987), 347.
[353] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 94.

> When they [the Severans, Monophysites] hear of "nature", they think of shameful and unbecoming things, the sexual organs of the bodies of men and women. Because of that they avoid this word as if they were pupils of the Saracens [Arabs]. For when the latter hear of the birth of God and His genesis, they at once blaspheme, imagining marriage, fertilization and carnal union.[354]

The awareness that Anastasius is showing in this and other passages[355] reflects the period he was living in. Anastasius wrote around 680-700 AD. By that time the Arabs had already established themselves as powerful rulers in most of the areas conquered about 40 years earlier, with Damascus as the Capital of the Caliphate. Moreover, the Qur'an had been gathered under the leadership of the third Caliph Othman (644-656 AD). Therefore, the interaction between the Arab Muslims and the Christians made interested Christians better-informed. It is noticeable though that a lack of full awareness is due to the delay of the process of Arabization of the territories under Muslim rule. When the process of Arabization started in the first quarter of the eighth century, there was a new development in the Christian understanding of Islam. At that time the Christians started to read Islam in its original language whether in the Qur'an or in the tradition and theology that was developing.

Anastasius, by linking the teachings of the Monophysites to those of the Arabs, held the Monophysites responsible for the Arab conquests, and considered the conquests to be a temporary punishment from God over the 'Faithful' because of their divisions and heretical sects.[356] Anastasius might be the first Christian writer who linked Islam with a Christian 'heresy'.

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[354] In relation to the Qur'anic verses 6:101; 72:3. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 94.
[355] For a detailed discussion of his work see for example S.H. Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims" in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 4/32 (1987), 348-355.
[356] John Haldon, "The works of Anstasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief" in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material* edited by Averil Cameron & Lawrence Conrad, Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1992), 115; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 97ff.

**4. The Arab/Muslim Conquest was perceived by Christians as an act of liberation.**

Dionysius described how the people of Emesa, Damascus and other cities welcomed the victorious Arab troops at al-Yarmuk battle as liberators after the expulsion of the Roman soldiers from the Levant.[357] He referred to the conquerors as Arabs, not Muslims. Muhammad was the "King of the Arabs". Muhammad's successors were the leaders of the Arabs.[358] Moreover, Dionysius reported what he found "in the tales and stories of the Egyptians" that Benjamin, the Patriarch of the Copts, surrendered Egypt to the Arabs "out of enmity towards Cyrus, the Chalcedonian patriarch [and ruler] of Egypt".[359] Dionysius' account concerning Egypt shows how the two major Monophysite churches in Syria and Egypt had the same problem with the Byzantine authorities and the imperial church. They had both suffered pressures and persecution because of their rejection of Chalcedon.

The conquest of Egypt is of particular interest because it indicates clearly that Arabs were not fighting in order to spread the Muslim faith, a faith that was not yet developed at that time. The story, related by Dionysius and found in the Muslim historical writings, shows that 'Amr ben al-'As, the Muslim leader, agreed not to enter Egypt when Cyrus negotiated with him a payment of 200,000 denarii per annum.[360] It seemed that Cyrus paid the amount for the first year. When Heraclius heard of the agreement, he deposed Cyrus and appointed Manual, a new general of Armenian descent and from Heraclius's ethnic group, to rule Egypt. When the Arabs came to take the djizya a year later, Manual refused to pay. Therefore, 'Amr launched a war to invade Egypt with the encouragement of the exiled Coptic patriarch, Benjamin. The victory of the Arabs was celebrated by the people of Egypt, according to Dionysius, and their victory was considered a victory for the Coptic Church.[361]

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[357] Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chron*icles, 157.
[358] Ibid., 144.
[359] Ibid., 158.
[360] See details of the peace pact in R.H. Charles (Trans. & Ed.) *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic text (NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2007), 193.
[361] Ibid., 158-9.

This story is confirmed by John, the Coptic bishop of Nikiu, probably born at the time of the Muslim invasion of Egypt. He became a bishop in AD 690 and administrator general of the monasteries in AD 696.[362] John wrote a detailed account of the Muslim invasion of Egypt. He might be the only one who refers to the Arabs as 'Muslims'. His account asserted that the Muslims invaded Egypt by force and caused a lot of destruction and death, especially in Fajum.[363] He might be the only Christian writer to mention the apostasy of those Christians who fought alongside the Muslims to conquer Alexandria and the Babylon citadel:

> And when those Moslems, accompanied by the Egyptians who had apostatized from the Christian faith and embraced the faith of the beast, had come up, the Moslem took as a booty all the possessions of the Christians who had fled, and they designated the servants of Christ enemies of God.[364]

It is not clear though who those apostatized Christians were. They might have been Egyptians from the Arab tribes residing in Sinai, which Arabs had to cross by its northern side alongside Gaza in order to reach Egypt. If this is so, it would be clear that Islam was a 'choice' offered only to the Arabs only. It seems also that this issue of apostasy was used to accuse the Chalcedonians. Interestingly, John mentioned only one name of an apostate called John, the Chalcedonian of the convent of Sinai.[365]

Although John described the 'Muslims' and their leader 'Amr ben al-'As as savage and intolerant to the Christians, he reported the re-appearance of Benjamin, the exiled Coptic patriarch, after the Muslim victory in a favorable tone. Benjamin blamed the wickedness of Heraclius and Cyrus for the Muslim victory.[366]

John seems to have knowledge of the beliefs of the Muslims. He referred several times to their prophet Mohammad as the 'beast' anticipating the Anti-Christ[367] and their belief in

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[362] Charles, *Bishop of Nikiu*, V.
[363] Ibid., 180-182.
[364] Ibid., 182.
[365] Ibid., 201.
[366] Ibid., 200.
[367] Ibid., 201.

Christ as they "made Him (merely) a created being".[368] He might have ignored giving details of the Muslim beliefs because his writing aimed to warn the Christians not to follow the new religion. There is no clear evidence, though, that the process of Arabization and Islamization of Egypt had started at that early stage. It could be that the difficulties the Egyptian church and people faced at that time were due to the fact that Egypt was not conquered by peace pact but by war. The Islamic law that was starting to develop at John's time differentiates between *Dar al-Islam* (House/Land of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (House/Land of War). The attitude towards both lands differs too.[369]

Michael the Syrian[370] put this notion of liberation in clearer words when he said:

> The God of vengeance, raised up from the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us from the hands of the Romans. It was no light benefit for us to be freed from the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, anger and ardent cruelty towards us, and to find ourselves in peace.[371]

In conclusion, the Arab/Muslim conquests were perceived by Christians mostly in a good manner and with a 'welcoming' attitude. This attitude was the result of the pressures the Christian churches and the people of the area had suffered for a long time under the Persian and Byzantine empires. Christians also welcomed the Arabs without good knowledge of their new religion. The Arab conquests were perceived as part of God's plan, and to fulfill God's purposes.

Christians attitudes towards Islam and Muslims did change as understanding of Islam grew among Christians and as socio-political circumstances in the region changed, as well as being a consequence of the growing awareness of the Muslims of their own religion and role.

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[368] Ibid., 202.
[369] Tolan, *Saracens*, 31, 35.
[370] A Syrian bishop from the Twelfth Century.
[371] Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 37.

## The Arab/Muslim Administration and the Status of Christians

The Arab/Muslim conquests gained for the Arabs vast lands and put under their rule huge numbers of peoples. The Arabs conquered Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt between AD 632- 641. These vast lands and peoples needed to be governed and organized under the new ruling regime. There is no doubt that the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (AD 634-644) was the master-mind behind the laying down of administrative arrangements in the new 'Muslim lands'. 'Umar's policies reinforced the 'Arab' identity of the Muslims. His policies were to ensure that Arab Muslims did not assimilate to a 'higher' culture and submit to alien religious influences in the conquered societies, and to keep Islam as purely 'Arab' as possible. To achieve this goal, 'Umar drew his policies in three major lines.[372] Firstly, he created separate military camps for the invading Arab armies outside the major cities. These camps were developed later on into cities such as *Misr* (Cairo) in Egypt. (Alexandria was the major city in Egypt at the time of Muslim conquest). This arrangement aimed at forbidding social and religious assimilation of the Arab Muslims to the inhabitants of the conquered cities.[373] Secondly, 'Umar gave the Christian (and Jewish) tribes in Arabia two options: they were either to become Muslims or to leave Arabia. Thirdly, Christian, Jews and others who were generally called 'non-Muslims' were to submit to the new government by paying the djizya (poll-tax). Paying the djizya was a system followed by all former imperial powers in the region. The logic behind it was that the conquerors were now providing security and the administration of the newly conquered land. They could not trust the conquered people to fight the "enemy" or the conquered armies with them and so the people paid the djizya to the army for their protection. Thus, the conquered people came to be called the protected people (*ahl al-Dhimmah*).[374] This system shows that Muslims were initially not interested in preaching Islam to non-Arabs, nor forcing non-Arabs to become Muslims. Rather, they were interested in the major income they could get from the non-Muslims who were now under their authority.

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[372] Kung, *Islam*, 173ff states & explains 'Umar's policies of administrating the new lands.
[373] Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, 7.
[374] "Djizayah" & "Ahl al-Dhimmah" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*. See also Mahmoud Ayoub, "Dhimmah in Qur'an & Hadith" in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* edited by Robert Hoyland, 25-35 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

Hans Kung and other Western scholars[375] note that:

> Conversions were not wanted; Christians' children were not to read the Qur'an. Conversion meant a loss of taxation and led to unnecessary problems of status among the Muslim elite and demands for the same financial privileges.[376]

The system of "*Mawali*" or *clients of Islam* supports this conviction. When some non-Arabs decided to become Muslims, their decision might have been the result of the work of Muslim preachers or of their own ambitions to gain a status in the government. Arab Muslims, however, did not accept these non-Arabs as full Muslims. The new convert became a client "of the Muslim Arab" at whose hands he had converted".[377] This arrangement had to do with accepting the new non-Arab Muslim in the Arab tribal system. This system was well-developed under the Umayyads.[378]

'Umar and the early Muslim elite leadership adopted the existing administration, social and economic systems that were in place amongst the people of the land that they had conquered. This decision required the help of the elite of the conquered people who stayed in charge of the administration for a long time under the leadership of a Muslim commander.[379]

'Umar, and later Muslim leadership, granted the Christians a special status in jurisdiction as part of their Muslim administration of the new lands and people under their rule. It was left to the Christian Churches to look after the legal issues of a Christian nature and related to personal affairs. This arrangement was part of the Muslim policy of adopting the former existing systems in the conquered lands.

> The autonomy enjoyed by the Christian communities then, was not a concession freely granted, but a practical necessity resulting

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[375] See for example T.W Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*. (Lahore (Pakistan) : SH. Muhammad Ashraf, 1896 (1961, 1965) ); Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1979); A.S Tritton, *The Caliphs and Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar* (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD., 1970).
[376] Kung, *Islam*, 174.
[377] Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 77.
[378] Ibid., 77; Hitti, *Arabs*, 232; *Cambridge History of Islam*, 52.
[379] Kung, *Islam*, 174, 182; Hitti, *Arabs*, 171.

> from Islamic theoretic concepts on the one hand, and from the social situation of the victors and vanquished respectively on the other hand.[380]

All these administrative arrangements show how the Arab Muslims were concerned to keep the unity of the Muslim '*Umma'*. It also shows that at that time Muslim theology and law were not developed with the aim of converting non-Arabs to Islam. It was only when the Qur'an was gathered under the third caliph 'Uthman, that Muslim theology started to develop. This was a process that took some decades to be established.

It is clear that 'Umar's administration rules were concocted from the peace pacts that Muslims granted to the dominant Christian population in conquered cities such as Damascus, Hims, Jerusalem and Egypt. These peace pacts, represented by 'Umar's pact/covenant, granted in particular to the people of Jerusalem in 638 (Appendix III: Map of Northern Christian Arab Tribes) are not however, to be confused with "al-shurut al-'Umaria, also known as "'Umar Covenant/Ordinances" (Appendix IV: Umar Covenant as it appeared in History of al-Tabari).

The first covenant as reported in the conquest accounts gave assurance (*Aman*) to the Christians: an assurance to their churches, crosses, personal safety and freedom of worship. The second covenant was a product of a developed understanding of Islam as the superior religion on the one hand and of Christianity's possible influence on the Muslims on the other hand. Many scholars[381] agree that this second covenant, known as *al-shurut* (ordinances of 'Umar), came from a later period and that it was named after 'Umar I in order to gain legitimatization when the Muslim leadership wanted to use these "al-Shurut"

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[380] Neophyte Edelby, "The Legislative Autonomy of Christians in the Islamic world" in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* edited by Robert Hoyland, 37-82 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 37. See also Antoine Fattal, "How Dhimmis were Judged in the Islamic World" in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* edited by Robert Hoyland, 83-102 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

[381] Kung, Islam; Arnold, The Preaching of Islam; Tritton, The Caliphs; and see Albrecht Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: Re-reading the "Ordinances of 'Umar" (Al-Shurut al-'umariyya) " in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* edited by Robert Hoyland, 103-124 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

in certain circumstances. These 'shurut' were divided into three sections.[382] The first regulated the relationship between the Christians and Muslims on religious grounds. This section contradicted the peace pacts because it restrained the freedom of worship and the "*Aman*" granted to the Christians and their places and holy symbols. The second section regulated the possible financial dealings among Christians and Muslims. The shurut in this section ensured that the Muslim party in any financial "contract" was superior and controlled by Islamic law. The third section regulated Christian dress and social life. This section seemed to aim at labeling the Christians as "others" to help Muslims identify with their own heritage.

Would this system work when the majority of people were still Christian? If the Muslims were the minority in the society, it would be a system discriminating against the Muslims themselves. This suggests that these "shurut" were a product of a later period of Islamic rule, a period of a well-developed Islamic theology and socio-political system. The first mention of these "shurut" was made by Ibn Hazem (d. AD1064),[383] and the most common version of "al-shurut" is from Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's book *Ahkam Ahl al-Dhimma* (d. AD 1349).[384] The dates of these writers reflect the political situation and the struggle between the Muslims and the Christian West just before and throughout the Crusades of the eleventh to the – thirteenth centuries. The 'Arab' Christians became a scapegoat as one of the results of these campaigns.

These "*Shurut*" in fact contradicted the first Muslim administrative rules instituted by 'Umar I involving the Christians. They also contradicted the local, legal and religious autonomy that was granted to the Christians. There is also no doubt that Christians were integrated into the new administration as they had more expertise in running financial and

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[382] Albrecht Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: Re-reading the "Ordinances of 'Umar" (Al-Shurut al-'umariyya) in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* edited by Robert Hoyland, 103-124 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 104-106.
[383] Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 59.
[384] Noth, " Problems of Differentiation ",104 (4); see also Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 44-46 and Tritton, *The Caliphs*, 5-6.

legal systems than did the Arab nomadic fighters. The collecting of taxes, for instance, was left to the Christian officials in Egypt and Syria after the conquests.[385]

'Umar was assassinated by a slave in AD 644. His death was the first political assassination in Islam, but not the last. 'Uthman ben 'Afan was chosen to be the third Caliph (AD 644-656). The importance of 'Uthman's rule came from his policies.[386] First the wave of conquests slowed down under his leadership. He seemed not to be interested in expanding his empire beyond what it had already reached. Then he achieved the gathering and finalizing of the Qur'an into a single book. This action aimed at codifying the Qur'anic text, unifying the Muslim *ummah* and providing the caliph in al-Medina with a central authority based on the sacred text and so he ordered the other Qur'anic texts or fragments to be burned. His concern shifted from the "Muslim Ummah" and its unity, to focus more on his tribal affairs. His nepotism prepared for the Umayyads (his own tribal affiliation) to access power in Damascus after two civil wars with the fourth Caliph, Ali and his two sons and followers.[387]

## The Umayyad Rule (AD 660-750)

The Umayyads are the tribe of the third Caliph 'Uthman. Mu'awiya was appointed by 'Umar I as the first Arab/Muslim governor of Syria residing in Damascus. He became the caliph in Damascus in 660/661 as a result of the first civil war between himself and 'Ali who had been elected Caliph after 'Uthman. Mu'awiya refused to pay homage to 'Ali when he did not punish the killers of 'Uthman. Mu'awiya was able to stand up to Ali due to his powerful rule in Syria that had been strengthened under 'Uthman's rule. He refused to be moved out of Damascus by 'Ali.[388] This incident reflects the geopolitical importance of Damascus to the early over-all Muslim power-play.

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[385] Kung, *Islam*, 175.
[386] Ibid., 176-177.
[387] There is no room and it is not of the interest of this work to go into the details of this struggle that was developed later to be a Sunni-Shiite wars. For details see for example *Cambridge History of Islam* Vol. 1, 67-72 and Hitti, *Arabs*, 178 – 186.
[388] Kung, *Islam*,183-185.

After the first war ended with the death of ‘Ali in al-Kufa in Iraq in AD 661, Mu’awiya took power as the Caliph in Damascus with his election in Jerusalem in AD 660; after his election he prayed in "Golgotha, in the garden of Gethsemane and at the tomb of Mary”.[389]

The Umayyad rule can be divided into two main periods. The first period was established and ruled by Mu’awiya Ibn Abi Sufian (661-680) and his son Yazid (680-683) and grandson Mu’awiya II (683-684). This family was known as the Sufyanid. They comprised the first dynasty in Islam. Caliphs before Mu’awiya were elected by the Muslim umma who used to pay homage to the newly elected Caliph in Medina, the first political capital of Islam. Mu’awiya however, moved the political capital to Damascus, the center of Syriac civilization and a meeting point of Greek and Syriac traditions. At this period of time and under these rulers, especially under Mu’awiya, Muslim rule faced several challenges internally and externally, though Christian-Muslim relations seemed to be at their best. Muslim rulers were open to learn about the Christian faith and people. Muslim theology was still undeveloped. Muslim caliphs depended on the Syrian Christians to strengthen their rule:

> In securing his throne and extending the limits of Islamic dominion, Mu’awiya relied mainly upon Syrians, who were still chiefly Christian, and upon the Syro-Arabs, who were mainly Yemenites, to the exclusion of the new Muslim immigrants from al-Hijaz. Arabic chronicles dwell upon the sense of loyalty which the people of Syria cherished towards their new chief.[390]

The second period was established by another Umayyad family called Marwanid. The founder of this Umayyad dynasty was Marwan (AD 683-685) who was succeeded by ‘Abd al-Malik (685–705). The sons of ‘Abd al-Malik ruled until AD750 when the Umayyads lost the Islamic rule to the Abbasids.

The second period was also marked by leaders who came to Damascus from al-Medina, but at a time when the Muslim/Arab identity and theology were clearer and more developed. It was therefore under this new dynasty that the process of Arabization and

[389] Kung, *Islam*, 186; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 136.
[390] Hitti, *Arabs*, 194.

Islamization began. These developments created new facts on the ground and led to a new Christian understanding of Islam and Muslim rule.

**a. The Sufyanid Umayyad Dynasty.**

The Christian chronicles reported Mu'awiya's reign in highly favorable terms. John of Penkaya said:

> A man called Mu'awiya became king controlling the two kingdoms, of the Persians and of the Byzantines...he allowed everyone to live as they wanted…of each person they required only tribute [djzia], allowing him to remain in whatever faith he wished. [391]

It is interesting that the Greek chronicles of Theophanes reported how Mu'awiya rebuilt a church dome in Edessa that fell down because of an earthquake.[392] Theophanes' report is significant because it comes in the middle of his negative reports about the Arab attack on some Byzantine lands; Mu'awiya occupied Cyprus after he developed a strong fleet in the Mediterranean[393] and besieged Constantinople for seven (or five) years. As a result, Theophanes described Arabs as "God's enemies".[394]

The Maronite Chronicle (AD 664+) reported a unique incident that showed Mu'awiya's interest in the Christian-Christian dialogue while a governor in Damascus and not yet a caliph. It concerns both Jacobites and Maronites. Maronites were the only Christians who accepted the Monothelete doctrine proposed by Heraclius and Sergius. Jacobite and Maronite bishops held an inquiry into the faith "in the presence of Mu'awiya". The Jacobites were defeated according to the Maronite chronicler. Although there are no details provided about the nature of the dialogue, Mu'awiya ordered the Jacobites to pay 20,000 denari in to protect them from the persecution of the Maronite (Orthodox) Church members.[395] This incident also shows how the Christians felt able to ask for the help of their Muslim rulers against other Christians. Asking Muslims to be judges or protectors of

[391] Sebastian Brock, *John Penkayes*, 61; see also Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*,186-7.
[392] Mango & Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, 497.
[393] Ibid., 478.
[394] Ibid., 493.
[395] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 30.

one Christian group against another proved to be a harmful practice to the Christian population at a later stage and caused some Christians to leave the Church and embrace Islam. Some Christian Synodical canons stated clearly that "Christians [are] not to bring their differences and conflicts to Muslim courts".[396]

The first Umayyad dynasty thus showed an open attitude to the Christians under their rule, especially in Syria and Mesopotamia. This openness from Mu'awiya's side led Christians to praise him and most importantly to collaborate with him and to help him in his fight to protect his throne in the civil war. Mu'awiya married a Christian Arab woman from Kalb tribe, who was to become the mother of Mu'awiya's son and successor Yazid.[397] Mu'awiya also adopted fully the former Byzantine administrative arrangements, which required that he keep the Christian high officials in their places to run the registration and other official and financial "departments" in the new government. Christians in the new Muslim-ruled lands were still in the majority and the most experienced in running its affairs.[398]

After Mu'awiya died in AD 680, his son Yazid (680-3) ruled for three and a half years and died at an early age. Yazid's son Mu'awiya II (683-4) could not rule, as he was young. It was at this time that an Islamic civil war started over the Caliphate. It is clear that the Christian writers of the time were defending the right of Mu'awiya's dynasty to rule.[399] The Caliphate, by Mu'awiya's action, at this time departed from choosing the "commander of the believers" from among the faithful Muslims or the companions of the Prophet. They moved to a hereditary system after the manner of other nations where royal succession was established by birth and inheritance.

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[396] Herman G.B. Teule, "Ghiwarghis I" in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* edited by David Thomas & Barbara Roggema, Vol. 1 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), 152.
[397] Kung, *Islam*, 192.
[398] Ibid., 192-3.
[399] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 197. There is no room to get into the details of this struggle over power. However, my interest is to show the Christian attitude towards Mu'awiya's rule and family, for more details see for example Kung, *Islam*,199.

**b. The Marwanid Umayyad Dynasty:**

Contrary to the "secular" type of kingship that Mu'awiya and his descendents demonstrated in their rule, their cousins, the Marwanids, were more religious and aware of their Muslim identity. When Mu'awiya was appointed to govern Damascus he moved from the spiritual birth-place of Islam in Medina. In Damascus, he was exposed to a different culture and religious environment. The second Umayyad dynasty, the Marwanids, on the other hand were brought up in Medina where Mohammad had ruled and applied his Islamic law.

Marwan ibn al-Hakam was the one chosen to end the second Islamic civil war and claim the caliphate in Damascus in 683/684,[400] but he died shortly after becoming the Caliph. His son 'Abd al-Malik (685-705) became the Caliph. Under him and his sons the Umayyads reached the zenith of their rule.[401] At the same time there was a change of policies, especially when 'Abd al- Malik ended the civil war and became the sole Caliph in the empire.[402]

This new Umayyad family started the Arabization process of the Muslim empire, especially at its heart in Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt. This Arabization process might have been the result of the new awareness that this caliphate family had of their Arab-Islamic identity, which they considered to be superior to the nations/cultures they were ruling.

'Abd al-Malik and his successors took certain measures to advance this Arabization process and eventually to accomplish the Islamization of the empire.[403] This accomplishment had been issued from the desire of 'Abd al- Malik to unite the empire that

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[400] Holt, *Cambridge History of Islam* Vol.1, 82-3; Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life* 198.
[401] Hitti, *Arabs*, 206.
[402] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 200-201. There were two caliphs at the time of 'Abd al-Malik: Ibn al-Zubyer in Mecca and 'Abd al-Malik in Damascus. 'Abd-al-Malik could overcome his rival caliph and became the sole Muslim king.
[403] By Islamization I mean the Islamization of the system, administration, and official government bodies. It is noticeable that no forced conversions were reported and Arabization was not introduced in the areas where Islam became the religion of the majority such as Iran.

had suffered two civil wars and was composed of different ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic groups. Creating a unified identity of the empire was a process that had begun with the Prophet, Muhammad, who had succeeded in uniting the Arabs of Arabia under Islam. Now was the time for ‘Abd al-Malik and his successors to unite the expanded empire under a “unified” Arab-Islamic identity.[404] ‘Abd al-Malik’s attitude might also have been the result of his religious upbringing:

> he had been given a very religious upbringing [in Medina]. He knew the Qur’an and took a great delight in cultivating friendly relations with the pious and with Qur’anic scholars.[405]

His love of the Qur’an, it can be surmised, influenced his love of the Arabic language and encouraged him to start the process of Arabization that involved the currency, government “*Diwans*” (registries), buildings and art. The whole process was a declaration of the superiority of the Arabic language, the holy language of the Qur’an, over and above the languages of the people in the newly conquered lands.

**How did ‘Abd al-Malik start the process that was continued by his sons and successors?**

Firstly, he introduced a new Arab-Muslim currency in the place of the Greek and Persian currencies. He removed the inscription of the cross from the Greek coins and put instead an Arabic quotation from the Qur’an: “Say, God alone is God”.[406] It seems that this change of currency was not the first Muslim attempt; the Maronite chronicle reported that Mu’awiya minted gold and silver, “but it was not accepted because it has no cross on it”.[407] The fact that the coins minted by ‘Abd al-Malik became accepted locally and internationally shows that Arab Muslim rule had become more centralized and established on the ground. The removal of the cross and the introduction of the Qur’anic verse no doubt aimed to show the new Muslim understanding of Christianity and the change of

[404] Kung, *Islam*, 203; Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 80.
[405] Kung, *Islam*, 202.
[406] Kung, *Islam*, 204; Dionysius of Telmaher reported that Arab coins must be minted without images with the name of Muhammad on one side and ‘Abd al-Malik on the other side. See Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 204.
[407] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 32.

attitude towards Christians. Christians now were to be introduced to the Muslim faith through their daily contact with the coins. It also reflected a fresh understanding by the Muslim caliph of the superiority and finality of Islamic faith over and above Christianity.

Secondly, the Arab Muslims had originally kept the administration of the conquered lands in the hands of its local people who were Christian majority. They in their turn kept the languages of administration as they were before: Syriac in Syria and Mesopotamia; Greek in Palestine and some parts of Syria and Egypt; and Coptic in Egypt. 'Abd al-Malik now ordered that the Arabic language be the official language of the administration.[408] The replacement of the official languages, which were considered 'holy' by the Christian population in their respective areas, by Arabic was a big change and a new challenge to Christian identity and spirituality. It was clear that this change aimed at replacing the old 'holy' languages with the new 'holy' Arabic language of the Qur'an. This change created a "shock" to Christians because Arabic was an undeveloped written language at that stage.[409]

Thirdly, he introduced new sophisticated Muslim religious monuments as part of the process of declaring the superiority of Islamic religion over other religions, especially Christianity. Jerusalem became very important to the Umayyads. Although Umar I and Mu'awiya paid attention to its centrality and religious importance, 'Abd al-Malik was the first to erect a major Islamic building in Jerusalem as part of the 'Muslim world'. The Dome of the Rock became an iconic Islamic building that was in the style of the great Byzantine churches, but without images. Muslims introduced the beautiful Arabic calligraphy in the Dome with inscribed Qur'anic verses. The choice of these verses showed the Muslim leadership's growing awareness of Christianity. It also showed the growing understanding of their distinctive identity.[410]

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[408] Kung, *Islam*, 204-5.
[409] Dionysius says that the full Arabization of the 'Diwans' was done under al-Walid, 'Abd al-Malik's son (AD 705-715).
[410] Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 82.

Some verses (Sura 112; 4:171) in particular declare the Muslim faith in the oneness of God, and the relationship between Jesus and God from a Muslim point of view.

> O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor say of Allâh aught but the truth. The Messiah 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), was (no more than) a Messenger of Allâh and His Word, ("Be!" - and he was) which He bestowed on Maryam (Mary) and a spirit (Rûh) created by Him; so believe in Allâh and His Messengers. Say not: "Three (trinity)!" Cease! (It is) better for you. For Allâh is (the only) One Ilâh (God), Glory be to Him (Far Exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allâh is All Sufficient as a Disposer of affairs. (Qur'an 4:171)

Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock not only to show Islam's superiority over Christianity, but also to provide an alternative place of pilgrimage. The Ka'ba at that time was under the control of al-Zubyer, the rival Caliph in Mecca. His choice of Jerusalem was because of its proximity to the capital, Damascus, and its spiritual value as the first direction "Qibla" of prayer in Islam. It also had a link with Muhammad's night journey to heaven (17:7). Moreover, the Dome of the Rock was a consequence of 'Abd al-Malik's 'new' awareness of the link between royalty and great religious buildings. Muslim rulers from Muhammad to this time were satisfied with erecting simple mosques with flat roofs. By erecting these great buildings, he was imitating the Byzantine emperors who erected such buildings to reflect their greatness.[411] 'Abd- al-Malik recruited Christian artists from Byzantium to achieve the building of this magnificent Shrine.[412]

The tradition of building splendid mosques to supersede churches continued under 'Abd al-Malik's successors. Al-Walid (705-715) is reported to have converted the great Church of St. John the Baptist in Damascus into the Umayyad Mosque.[413]

In addition to the process of Arabization, with its aim of consolidating the new Muslim empire that had suffered civil wars and divisions, the Umayyads actually followed the Abu

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[411] Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 53; Kung, *Islam*, 202, 206.
[412] Ibid., 52.
[413] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 208; Kung, *Islam*, 207. The visitor in Damascus today will notice the Greek Christian inscriptions on the outer Western wall at the Umayyad Mosque in Old Damascus.

Bakar's earlier policy. The new Caliphs involved their Muslim armies in new conquests to keep them away from civil wars. The Muslim armies expanded the empire across North Africa, as far as Spain to the West and as far as the borders of China to the East, including the Turkish territories.[414]

Although the first Umayyad dynasty's rule was marked by openness to the Christians in general, this was not the experience of Christians everywhere. Coptic historians reported clashes and bad relations at times between the Christians and some of the governors appointed by the caliph, 'Abd al-Malik, to rule Egypt. These incidents seemed to be a part of the struggle for power between the Patriarch and the new governor. These clashes might be understood in the light of the former struggle between the Chalcedonian Byzantine governor of Egypt and the Coptic patriarch.[415]

On the financial side, 'Abd al-Malik started levying a poll-tax on every adult male under his rule. This was a change in the policy that had been followed by the Arab Muslims since the early conquests. When they conquered the Christian-dominant regions, they levied poll-tax (djizya) on the cities collectively, not individually. To achieve this new policy 'Abd al-Malik held a census that was negatively received by the Christians. The *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (AD 775) reported:

> 'Abd al-Malik made a census (Ar. *ta'dil*) among the Syrians, issuing strict orders that everyone should go to his own country and village…everyone should be registered by his own name and that of his father, together with his vineyard, olives, cattle, sons and everything that belonged to him. From this time, the poll-tax (Ar. djizya) began to be levied on the skulls of adult males. From this all (sorts of) evils began to well up against the Christian nation.[416]

[414] JJ Sanders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 82-94 provides the details of this expansion. See also Hitti, *Arabs*, 208-217.
[415] Herald Suermann, "Copts and the Islam of the Seventh Century" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Earl Islam* edited by E. Grypeou, M. Swanson, & D. Thomas, 95-109 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 99.
[416] Palmer, *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 60.

Under the leadership of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Aziz[417] (717-720) there was a change of poll-tax policy again. Ever since the conquests Arab Muslims only had been exempted from paying tribute to the Muslim government. The *Mawali* [non-Arab Muslims used to pay the tribute even if they embraced Islam. ‘Umar II introduced his taxation policy by exempting all Muslims (Arabs and non-Arabs) from paying tributes/taxes to the government and kept taxation on the non-Muslims only. This attitude encouraged many non-Muslims to embrace Islam or else escape to the monasteries and isolated places.[418]

This policy of taxation based on religious, not ethnic grounds, affected the government revenue from taxes.[419] The distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in paying taxes was a further element in the growing Muslim awareness of their identity, and of Islam as a universal religion, not belonging only to the Arabs. This awareness might be understood when we learn that ‘Umar II was in good relations with Muslim theologians. His taxation policy might thus have been a tool to encourage conversions to Islam:

> When one of his agents wrote that his fiscal reforms in favor of new converts would deplete the treasury, ‘Umar replied, “Glad would I be, by Allah, to see everybody become Moslem, so that thou and I would have to till the soil with our hands to earn a living.[420]

‘Umar II’s awareness of his own faith and the Christian faith led him to open a theological discussion with the Byzantine emperor Leo III (717-711),[421] which resulted in him writing a letter inviting Leo III to Islam. This letter opened the discussion between both “zealous reformers of their respective faiths”.[422]

The process of Arabization and Islamization in the previously Christian-dominated lands, development of Islamic theology and law, and the actions of ‘Abd al-Malik and his

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[417] He is known as ‘Umar II. He was the only successor of ‘Abd al-Malik not from among his sons, but his brother’s son. He was known for his pious character.
[418] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 339-341; Kung, *Islam*, 231-232.
[419] Hitti, *Arabs*, 219.
[420] Ibid., 222; see also this concept in Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 43.
[421] Leo III was the emperor who caused the iconoclasm controversy in the Christian church.
[422] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 440-501 discusses all the issues related to those correspondences between the two leaders. There is no room to get into their details in this chapter.

successors were all factors that contributed to a growing Christian awareness of Islam as religion. With Arabic the official spoken and written language of the empire, Christians were also able to read the foundational texts of Islam, namely the Quran and the Hadith,[423] in their original language and discuss the theological, social and legal issues in Arabic.

This growing awareness was reflected in three main types of Christian writings at this stage of Christian-Muslim relations: disputations, apocalyptic writings and apologetics. Although Christians at this stage still wrote in their own native languages, by the end of the Umayyad period they were writing in Arabic.

Writers seemed to direct their writings at this stage to their own respective communities in order to encourage them to stay faithful to their Christian faith and not to be attracted to the financial or official privileges granted to the Muslims or new converts. They were also reflecting the Christian hope that their God would change the present situation and restore his kingdom among his people. These writings also reflected common Christian reactions to the changes that were happening on the ground.[424] The three types of writing were as follows:

**a. Disputation**

Dialogue between Christian monks and Muslim leaders started to develop in the eighth century; disputation became a recognized genre of Christian apologetics in the Muslim world during the ninth Century. Sidney Griffith, a prominent Islamic scholar, calls this genre [school] of apologetics 'the Monks in the Emir's Majilis (court)'.[425]

[423] The Hadith tradition reports what Muslim think Muhammad said or did during his prophethood. This tradition was started to be collected and organized in the mid eighth century.
[424] See for example G.J. Reinink, "Early Christian Reactions to the Building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem" in *Syriac Christianity under Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Rule* edited by Reinink 227-241(Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorm, 2005).
[425] Sidney Griffith, "Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bet Hale and a Muslim Emir" in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3/1(2000), no. 16. See also Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 36-38.

A well-known disputation that came from the late Umayyad period is "The Monk of Beth Hale and a Muslim Emir/notable". Although the date and location are not yet confirmed and require further study, Griffith suggests that this disputation happened in Dayr (monastery) Mar 'Abda near Kufa and Hira in Iraq. The Emir was Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik (d. 738) in his capacity as governor of Iraq in the early 720s.[426] The Monk was Abraham who might have been a student at the monastery; there is no firm information about him.[427] Although this work was written by a Christian monk in the Syriac language, it is probable that the dialogue itself was in Arabic. The fact that it was written in Syriac shows that it was directed to the Christian population in order to teach them how to respond to the theological challenges of Islam.[428] The dialogue addressed all the then major theological and liturgical questions between Christianity and Islam: the cross and its veneration, the Trinity and the Son of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, the Qur'an and the qibla (direction of prayer).[429] The monk who reported this dialogue stated that the emir, who came to the monastery to recover from sickness, was learned in the Christian scriptures and the Qur'an.[430]

This disputation shows that monasteries were still an attraction to the Muslim officials. Monasteries were acceptable places for dialogue with the monks and church leaders. It shows too how the Christians had started to realize what the Muslim faith was about, the monk showing knowledge of the Muslim faith and the Qur'an, while the Muslim emir showed knowledge of Christian doctrines. It was the beginning of theological interaction between the two faiths where the monk recognized Muhammad as "a wise man and a God-fearer, who freed you (Arabs) from the worship of demons and made you [Muslims], recognize the true God is one".[431]

The Muslim emir, according to the monk's report, admitted at the end of the dialogue that Christian faith is valid and correct: "I testify that were it not for the fear of the government

[426] Ibid., article no. 17.
[427] Holyland, *Seeing Islam*, 465.
[428] Griffith, *Disputing*, article no. 17; Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*,39.
[429] Ibid., article no. 21-34
[430] Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 37.
[431] Griffith, article no. 26.

and of the shame before men, many would become Christian. But you (Abraham) are blessed of God to have given me satisfaction by your conversation with me".[432] It is clear in this disputation that the intention of the Christian writer was to convince the Christians that even the Muslim notables agreed with them but were afraid of losing their lives or of being ashamed by leaving Islam and embracing Christianity. Indirectly, the monk was warning his readers to enjoy the privilege of being Christian and not to lose this privilege that others could not obtain.

### b. Apocalyptic writings

This genre of writing flourished in the last decade of the seventh century and through to the mid- eighth century. The writings were not limited to a particular Christian geographical area, but were composed in western Syriac, eastern Syriac and Coptic languages.[433] They were the result of a new Christian awareness of Islam at a time when the Muslim leadership was beginning to show clear signs that they were there to stay. These signs were the Arabization of language, administration, buildings and the tax increases that were discussed earlier. These writings reflect an apocalyptic understanding of the Arab conquest. They saw the Arab conquests as temporary. The Arabs would surely suffer an ultimate defeat in preparation for the second coming of Christ.[434]

Although Ps. Methodius[435] agreed that the Arab conquests were a chastisement of the Church for its sin,[436] he expressed his hope in the rise of the king of the Greeks (the Christian king) who would subject again the Ishmaelites, punish those who denied Christ for their worldly benefits and restore peace to the inflicted land where "churches will be renovated, towns will be rebuilt and priests will be freed from tax".[437] Pseudo-Ephrem[438] also drew a negative image of the Arab conquests. He expressed a high hope in God who

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[432] Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 38.
[433] Harald Suermann, "The Use of Biblical Quotations in Christian Apocalyptic Writings of the Umayyad Period" in *The Bible in Arab Christianity* edited by David Thomas (Leiden: Brill 2007), 69 – 73. See also Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam.* Hoyland lists and discusses all the apocalyptic texts in chapter 8.
[434] Palmer, , *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 224.
[435] Apocalypse from the 690's written in north Mesopotamia.
[436] Palmer, , *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 231.
[437] Palmer, , *The Seventh-Century Syriac Life*, 237-8.
[438] It is most probably a West Syrian apocalypse from the end of the seventh Century.

will wipe "this nation of robbers out of existence".[439] His hope was that God would not allow a non-Christian nation to have dominion over the Christians forever.

The Copts of Egypt also produced similar writings to express their concerns over the changes happening on their land. Pseudo-Athanasius[440] expressed his worries in this text:

> First, that nation will destroy the gold on which there is the image of the cross of the Lord our God in order to make all countries under its rule mint their own gold with the name of the beast written on it, the number of whose name is 666. Afterwards they will count the men and write their names in their documents, and set upon them high taxes…Afterwards they will measure the whole earth with the fields and the gardens, and they will count the cattle…At their end…they will take the strangers in the cities and the villages, and where ever they find them, they will call for their return and they will throw them into prison, for many at that time will leave their cities and their villages and go abroad because of the oppression of that nation.[441]

In contrast to previous apocalyptic writings, the Coptic writing did not express hope in any earthly king to save the Christians. Rather, it asked the faithful to have hope in God only and live up to their Christian virtues.[442] By putting his hope only in God, Pseudo-Athanasius affirmed the Coptic rejection of the Byzantine authority as "Christian authority". He did not have hope in the salvation of a Christian kingdom as the Syriac apocalypses did. This is a further feature that confirms the Coptic desire to be independent and to form their own religious and political identity. All these apocalypses used the prophecies in the book of Daniel to explain their interpretations and expectation of history.[443]

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[439] Gerrit J. Reinink, *Syriac Christianity under late Sasanian and early Islamic rule* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), 171. See also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 260-263.
[440] It is a Coptic apocalypse dates back to 725-750, see Harald Suermann, "The Use of Biblical Quotations in Christian Apocalyptic Writings of the Umayyad Period" in *The Bible in Arab Christianity* edited by David Thomas, 69-90 (Leiden: Brill 2007), 72.
[441] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 283-4.
[442] Ibid., 285.
[443] Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 33; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 283.

### c. Christian Apologetics

Alongside the growing awareness of Islamic identity and religious thinking under the Umayyad rule, there was a growing movement of Muslim thinkers and writers who developed Muslim Kalam (theology).[444] This development led to theological discussions of some important Muslim and Christian teachings at the caliphate court.[445] Christians found these discussions a challenge, especially when Muslims turned them into mission activity to convert Christians to Islam. This led some Christian writers to analyze the sources of Islam so as to respond to them. The fact that the Arabic language became a common language among Christians and Muslims gave good access and understanding to those Christian writers of the Qur'an and other Islamic laws and traditions. However, because the aim of Christian writers at that period was to protect Christians from conversion and to keep them faithful to their Christian faith and heritage, they wrote in their own original languages and not Arabic.

The most prominent and influential writer from this period was John of Damascus. John was an administrator at the Caliph's court, speaking Arabic, and well-versed in the Orthodox (Melkite) faith. He was, therefore, able to respond to the challenge of Islam and to give it a fresh interpretation. Although there is a lot of information about John's life, little of it can be trusted as most of the stories are legendary. He was born around AD 675 in Damascus to a Christian Melkite (Chalcedonian) family. His grandfather was probably Mansur ibn Sarjun (Sergius) who negotiated the handing over of Damascus to the Arab Muslims in AD 635. Both his grandfather and his father Sarjun worked as the financial administrators for the Umayyad caliphs, a position John himself inherited.[446] Mansur, the grandfather, worked for Mu'awiya (661-680) and Sarjun, the father, worked for 'Abd al-

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[444] Griffith, Sidney "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam" in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 11/2 (2008), no. 19-22.
[445] Ibid., article no. 19; See also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 482.
[446] See Reinhold F. Glei, "John of Damascus" in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, Vol.1 (600-900) edited by David Thomas and Barbra Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 295-6; Andrew Louth, *St John of Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3, 5; Daniel J, Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: 'The Heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 17-31 provides a thorough introduction to John's life, family and background.

Malik (685-705). The latter became a close friend to the caliph.[447] John is said to have become the financial administrator after the death of his father; he was in good relations with the Umayyad royal family since he was a companion and friend of Caliph Yazid ibn ʻAbd al-Malik (720-724). They had most probably grown up together.[448]

It is clear that John's position and his relationships with the Muslim leaders gave him a good understanding of Islam as a religion. He most probably resigned from his position and decided to become a monk at Mar Sabas monastery in Palestine around the year AD 726. His decision might have been due to two factors: firstly, his reaction to the iconoclastic controversy initiated by Leo III who was in contact with Caliph 'Umar II (717-720),[449] and secondly, his reaction to 'Umar's decision to prohibit Jews and Christians from serving in high offices in the Muslim empire.[450] These two factors were still controversial even after 'Umar II's death in AD 720 and came to the surface again after the death of John's friend, Yazid II (d. 724).

John's significance as a Christian writer came from the fact that he bridged two worlds, that of a monk from the East, never having lived in the West, and that of Greek writing. John's writings in Greek influenced the western perception of Islam for a long time. Moreover, he had first-hand experience of Islam and Islamic rule in Damascus, he had witnessed the changes in the caliphs' courts, he saw the Dome of the Rock rising in the Holy City and he might well have participated in the Christian-Muslim dialogues at the caliphs' court. His decision to become a monk and to dedicate his life to defending and explaining the 'Orthodox Faith' shows again the contribution of the monasteries in the region. They assisted the development of theology, the shaping of Christian identity and

[447] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 26-29 (2).
[448] Hitti, *Arabs*, 195-196. Hitti confuses Yazid ibn Mu'awiya (680-683) with Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik (720-724). If John was born 675, he would be only five or six years old when Yazid I became caliph. Moreover, it is more logical that the friendship between Sarjun and 'Abd al-Malik presupposes their sons' friendship. See the discussion on John's date of birth and his relation to Yazid II in Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 38-39.
[449] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 43.
[450] Kung, *Islam*, 8; Tolan, *Saracens*, 51.

the defending of the Christian faith in the face of heretical teachings.[451] Nonetheless, if John was of Arab origins[452] this was a privilege that put him in direct contact with the language of the Qur'an, the founding text of Islam. He did not need a medium to translate or explain it to him.

There are two main works attributed to John that deal with Islam: the first is *The Fount of Knowledge* and the second is *Disputation between a Saracen and a Christian.* While most of the scholars accept the first work as written originally by John, perhaps at Mar Sabas monastery around AD 743, they gravely doubt the originality of the second work that could well have been written by one of his disciples.[453]

The *Fount of Knowledge* is considered "the earliest exposition of the orthodox faith" [454] and "the first summa theologiae in Christian intellectual history".[455] The book is divided into three parts: the first on philosophical ideas, the second "on heresies" and the third is on the orthodox faith as it is presented in the six councils of Byzantine tradition.[456] This writing was a result of the continuous Christian-Christian struggle for clear identity that drew the line between 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy'. John aimed at clarifying the Melkite Christian identity in the face of the other Christian teachings, namely the Nestorian and/or the Jacobite/Monophysite traditions. His main concern was to explain to his people the heretical teachings in order to protect them from these heresies, especially the Arian heresy.

The third part of this work 'on heresies' is of concern to this thesis. John dealt with 100 heresies in this part; the last among them being Islam. His writing evidences good

[451] For more details on the contribution of the monasteries in the East see Sidney Griffith, "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam" in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 11/2 (2008), no. 9-13.
[452] Tolan, *Saracens*, 50. See also a good study on the subject by Rocio Doga Portillo, "The Arabic life of John of Damascus" in *Parole de L'orient* 21 (1996), 157-188.
[453] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 489 (123); Louth, *St John of Damascene*, 81.
[454] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 484.
[455] Griffith, *The Church*, 40.
[456] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 484; Griffith, *The Church*, 41.

knowledge of the Qur'an, especially the Qur'anic verses on Christ.[457] For him, Muhammad was a forerunner of the anti-Christ, a descendent of Ishmael and Hagar, and so he calls the Muslims Ishmaelites and Hagarenes. He continues:

> a false prophet arose for them surnamed Mamed [Muhammad], who having happened upon the Old and New Testament, in all likelihood through the association with an Arian monk, organized his own sect…he declared that a scripture had been brought down to him from heaven.[458]

John lists all the Qur'anic verses that deal with Christ and Christian faith and responds to them in the same way he dealt with previous heresies. His accusation that Muhammad was a disciple of an Arian monk[459] indicates that he considered Islam to be a heresy built on teachings from the Old and New Testaments, but without a full perception of the Christian truth. In his responses to the Qur'anic teachings he took the opportunity to explain Christian teachings. John's work shows well that he had ready access to the Qur'an and was well-versed in it. Moreover, he shows an understanding of the mentality of the Muslims and how they argued for their faith. This is further proof that John, as an official in the caliph's court, was part of their theological discussions, or at least had listened to them. Furthermore, John's identification of Islam as one 'heresy' among others was part of his struggle to clarify the 'orthodox' faith and identity, which was still under formation. The Melkite struggles with the Monothelete doctrine and Iconoclastic issue were still fresh; John dealt with the 'heresy' of Islam directly after dealing with the Monothelete 'heresy'.

The other work attributed to John of Damascus, though not proven to be his authentic writing, was the *Disputation between Saracen and a Christian.* This writing was probably composed by John's disciple, Theodore Abu Qurra (c.720-825).[460] This Disputation is a

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[457] The full texts of John's writings are in N.A. Newman (ed.), *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries* (632-900 AD), 139-162 (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Institute, 1993).
[458] Ibid., 139.
[459] It might be a reference to monk Bahira, a character mentioned in the biography of Muhammad to be the first Christian leader to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet since he was a child travelling to Syria for trade.
[460] Daniel Sahas suggests that he might have heard this argument from John himself and written it down later. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam,* 99-100.

manual written to help the Christians to respond to the Muslim challenges and questions regarding several Christian teachings, especially the nature of Christ.[461] For the first time, Muslim beliefs are discussed and also the Muslim understanding of Christian doctrines. He challenged Muslim beliefs, especially the prophethood of Muhammad and responded to the Muslim challenges to the Christian faith. His style of writing brought together the polemical and the apologetic traditions. He wanted to defend Christianity by attacking the faith of the Muslims. In doing so, John followed the long Christian tradition of fighting former 'heresies' and deviant Christian teachings. No wonder he labeled Islam, that confessed Christ in a different way from orthodox Christianity, as Christian heresy.

## Summary

Christian response to the Arab/Muslim conquests in the lands of what had been the Persian and Byzantine empires, and their early rule, reflected growing awareness of these conquests and their meaning, and their reactions to the Arab/Muslim growing awareness of themselves. At first, Christians saw in the Arab/Muslim conquests a divine purpose, in a time when Muslims were not fully aware of their religious identity, except for a handful of their ruling elite. As time went on, however the growing awareness of religious identity among Muslims and the translation of this awareness to actions on the ground, a process that was called Arabization and Islamization, opened the eyes of the Christian writers to new realities about Islam and the Muslims. These new realities led to new developments in the Christian understanding of Islam as a religion, no doubt as a result of the discussions that probably took place in the caliphate courts. The target of the Christian writers at this period of time was to protect their people from conversion to Islam rather than to discuss the Islamic faith with Muslims as such. This is clear from the fact that by the end of the Umayyad period (c.750), Christians were still writing in their own native languages and not in Arabic, which, by the early seventh century had become the official language of the Arab Empire. All this happened at a time when the Christian churches were struggling among themselves to find their own distinctive identity and to preserve it.

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[461] Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* 144-152. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, provides a detailed study of this disputation in 104ff.

Over this same time period Muslims started to realize that Islam could be more than 'a religion for the Arabs' only. It could be 'universal'. This realization led to the process of Arabization that seemed to aim mainly at a 'soft' Islamization of the people and their culture in the lands where the majority of the people remained faithful to their Christianity. It was empowered by a growing awareness among Muslim leaders that Arabic was a living language, the sacred language of the Qur'an – a process counterpart to the use of ancient sacred languages used by the Christian communities in their respective geographical locations. Inevitably this resulted in a declaration of the superiority of Islam and its sacred language over and above the former religions in the region.

In early relations with Christians, Muslims were open to listen and learn. By listening, they developed their own distinctive identity and moved from limited understanding of their religion to universality. Christians too were courageous to learn Arabic and study Islam in order to be able to respond to its spiritual and dogmatic challenges.

# Conclusion

A number of factors impact upon the ability of religious communities to form their own identity and develop it. Often identity formation involves a long time of struggle and interaction before consolidation. Even then it is not complete; communities are alive and their contexts and challenges constantly change. This is true for Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East since their inception as they have struggled and still struggle toward self-understanding, as well as understanding of one another.

For almost seven centuries, Christians struggled for their identity before the advent of Islam in the Middle East. Social and cultural elements, in addition to the difficulty of language communication, created many misunderstandings among Christians who were well established in Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan. Differences resulted in the creation of three main "Orthodox" Churches. The Nestorian Church found refuge under Persian rule, while Chalcedonians were the Melkite Church of Byzantium. Monophysites in Egypt and Syria struggled to survive due to imperial pressures. The situation in the East on the eve of Islam was of a divided church, divided loyalties and oppressed religious and cultural groups in the two great empires of the time: Byzantium and Persia.

A prophet was born in Arabia where a different, even a fourth, type of Christianity was prevailing. That ‘Christianity’ was a re-semitization of Jesus, that is, it was against all Greek philosophical concepts that formed the Christology of Orthodox Christianity through the previous seven centuries. For Islam, Jesus was only a human prophet. Influenced by an Ebionite/ Jewish-Christian type of Christianity that was condemned by Christian ‘Orthodox’ Churches, Islam developed its own identity.

Islam was, among other factors, a result of the hidden struggle between Jewish-Christianity and Orthodox Christianity in addition to the inter-Christian dogmatic clashes. The socio-political context of Arabia in the beginning of the seventh century, accompanied by the ambition of Muhammad, created the environment for the birth of Islam, which was

developed over twenty-three years influenced by the Christian (and Jewish) presence in Arabia. This fact has not been accepted by Muslim scholars until recently. Their acceptance calls upon Muslims and Christians to listen again to each other's way of defining their faith.

Unavailable in English-language material are some modern Muslim writers who accepted that Muhammad was using his social and religious context to form his own distinct identity. This thesis has noted their work, significant because Christian apologetics struggled for so long to prove that Muhammad was influenced directly by ‘Christian’ presence in Arabia.

Alongside this one needs to remember that new Muslim converts from Christian (and Jewish) backgrounds helped in forming later Muslim tradition and identity, as documented in some new works written by modern Arab Christian writers, as yet unknown in the West. This role developed after there were Muslim conquests of major Christian areas where Muslims interacted directly with Christianity.

Christians had their own interpretations of the Islamic conquests: it was God's punishment for divided Christianity, or God's will for the area. John of Damascus by the end of the Umayyad period concluded that "Islam was a Christian heresy". While Muslim writings tried to show a developed religious identity and purpose, Christian writings developed three types of literature: disputation, apocalyptic and apologetics in order to defend Christian faith from the accusations Muslims used against them, especially in the Qur'anic texts. The writers aimed to show the truth of the Christian faith, lead people to trust in God who would change the situation to a better one, and protect their people from conversion to Islam.

At the time of the conquests, Muslim identity was not yet fully formed; the purpose of the conquests was not only for spreading Islam, but also for economic and political reasons. Later Muslim sources reflect a retrospective view of what had happened. They try to argue that spreading Islam was the sole reason behind conquests, but by comparing the Christian

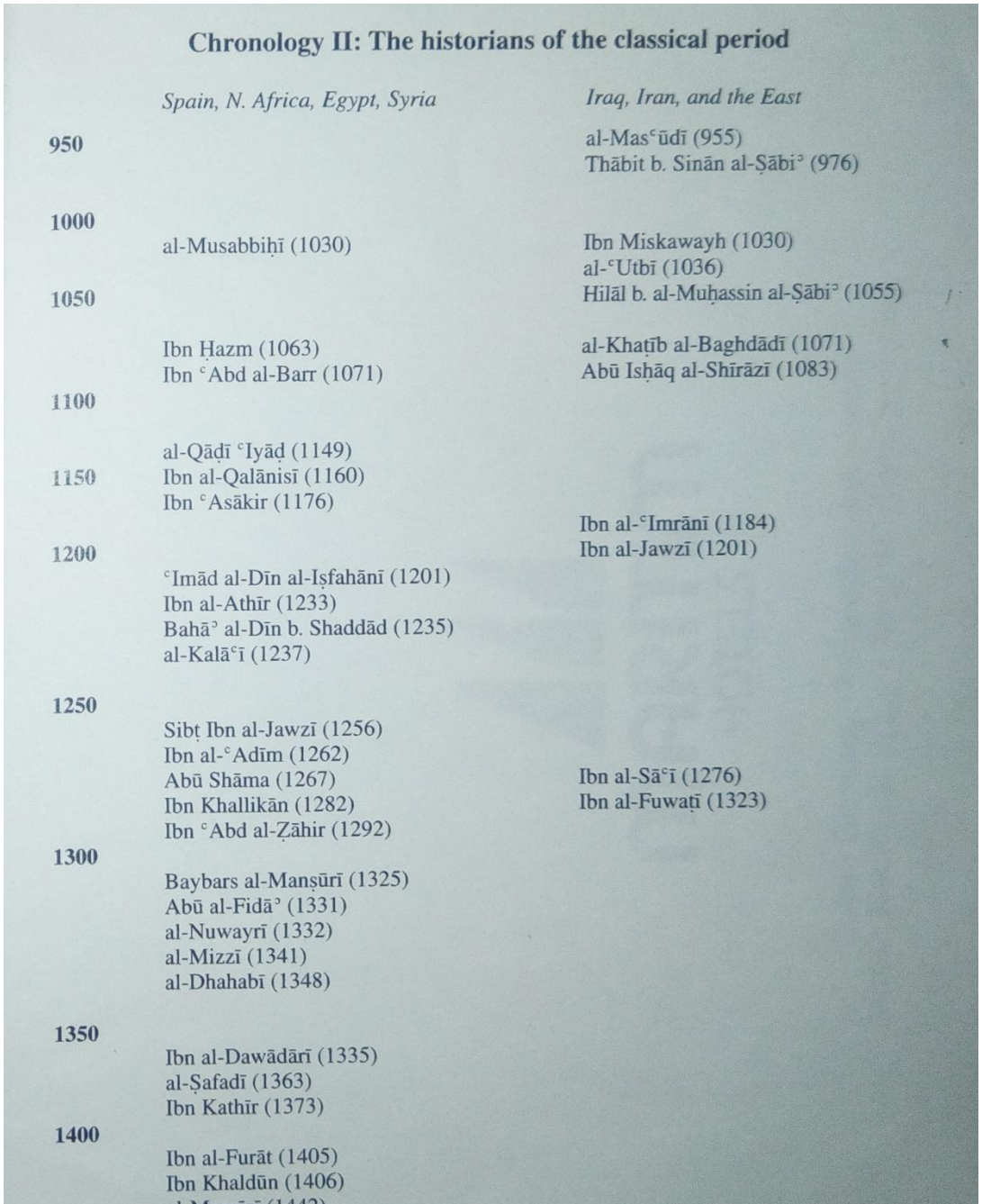
and Muslim writings of that era, it is clear that the Muslim historical writings that were written under the instruction of political power and religious direction when Islam was well established in the region under the 'Abbasids reflected an advanced understanding in Islamic identity from a later time. It was under the late Umayyads rulers and in the following centuries that Islam adopted the concept of the universality of Islam; their historians wanted us to believe that it was a universal religion from the beginning.

It is always dangerous to read history and interpret it from a retrospective understanding. It is safer to let the past to speak for itself. Comparing and contrasting different historical resources helps us to understand better what had happened and why in its socio-political and cultural context.

Because some modern Muslim scholars now acknowledge the ‘special’ Christian presence in Arabia, and in Mecca in particular, on the eve of Islam, and because they accept a possible influence from certain Christian beliefs on Islamic views about Christianity in general, especially those in the Qur’an, there is an increased possibility of re-reading Christian-Muslim relations, particularly on a theological level, with a different eye and attitude. It is historically evident that Islam adopted, and claimed to be a continuation of, an existent religious reality. If this is so, there is opportunity for Christians and Muslims to establish new grounds for theological understanding that may be characterized by an openness to listen to the faith of each other afresh, a commitment urgently needed in a region where adherents of both faiths, Islam and Christianity, need to learn how to listen to each other and not to judge the faith of others according only to our own sources of knowledge.

# Appendix I: The Historians of the Formative Period

From Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiv-xv.

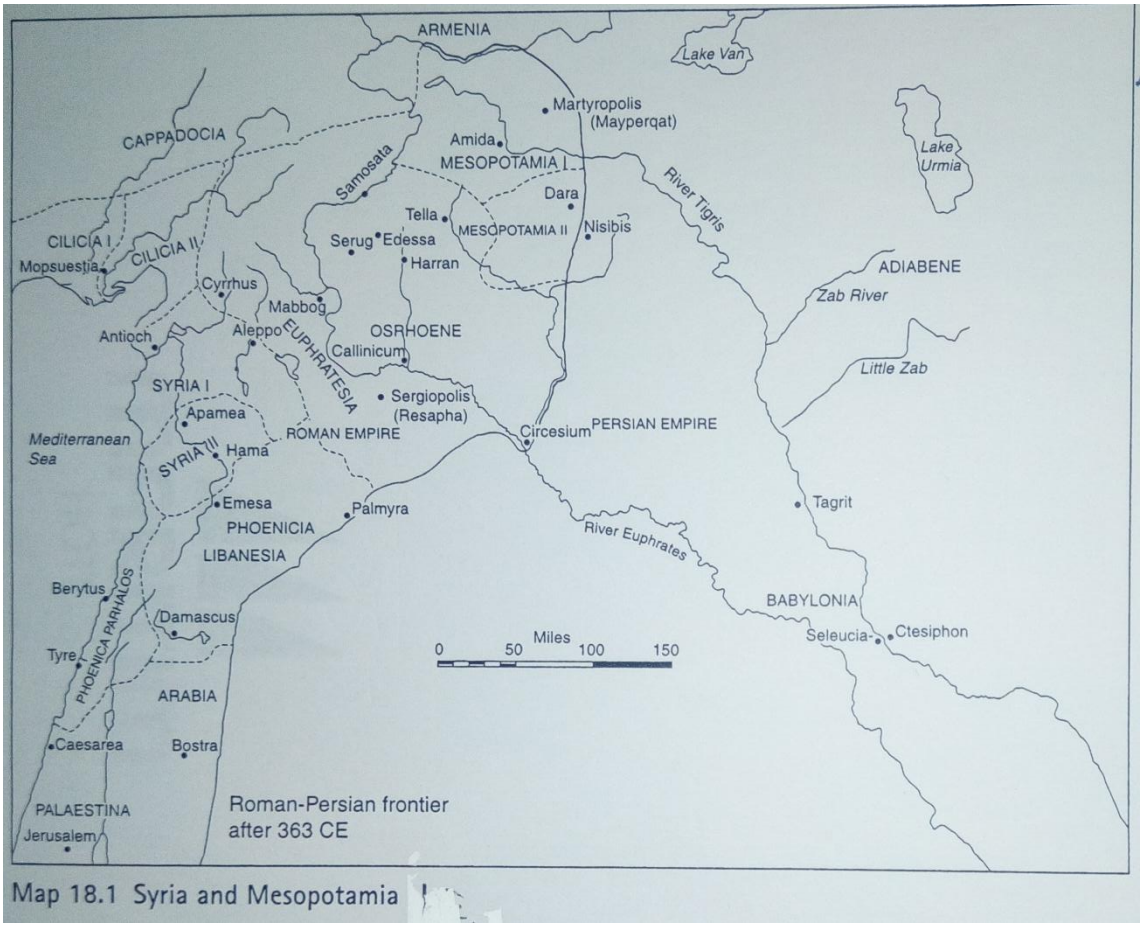


**Chronology II: The historians of the classical period**

| | *Spain, N. Africa, Egypt, Syria* | *Iraq, Iran, and the East* |
|---|---|---|
| 950 | | al-Masᶜūdī (955)<br>Thābit b. Sinān al-Ṣābiʾ (976) |
| 1000 | al-Musabbiḥī (1030) | Ibn Miskawayh (1030)<br>al-ᶜUtbī (1036) |
| 1050 | Ibn Ḥazm (1063)<br>Ibn ᶜAbd al-Barr (1071) | Hilāl b. al-Muḥassin al-Ṣābiʾ (1055)<br>al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (1071)<br>Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī (1083) |
| 1100 | al-Qāḍī ᶜIyāḍ (1149) | |
| 1150 | Ibn al-Qalānisī (1160)<br>Ibn ᶜAsākir (1176) | Ibn al-ᶜImrānī (1184) |
| 1200 | ᶜImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (1201)<br>Ibn al-Athīr (1233)<br>Bahāʾ al-Dīn b. Shaddād (1235)<br>al-Kalāᶜī (1237) | Ibn al-Jawzī (1201) |
| 1250 | Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (1256)<br>Ibn al-ᶜAdīm (1262)<br>Abū Shāma (1267)<br>Ibn Khallikān (1282)<br>Ibn ᶜAbd al-Ẓāhir (1292) | Ibn al-Sāᶜī (1276)<br>Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (1323) |
| 1300 | Baybars al-Manṣūrī (1325)<br>Abū al-Fidāʾ (1331)<br>al-Nuwayrī (1332)<br>al-Mizzī (1341)<br>al-Dhahabī (1348) | |
| 1350 | Ibn al-Dawādārī (1335)<br>al-Ṣafadī (1363)<br>Ibn Kathīr (1373) | |
| 1400 | Ibn al-Furāt (1405)<br>Ibn Khaldūn (1406) | |

# Appendix II: The East: Syria and Mesopotamia

Lucas Van Rompey, "The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 364.

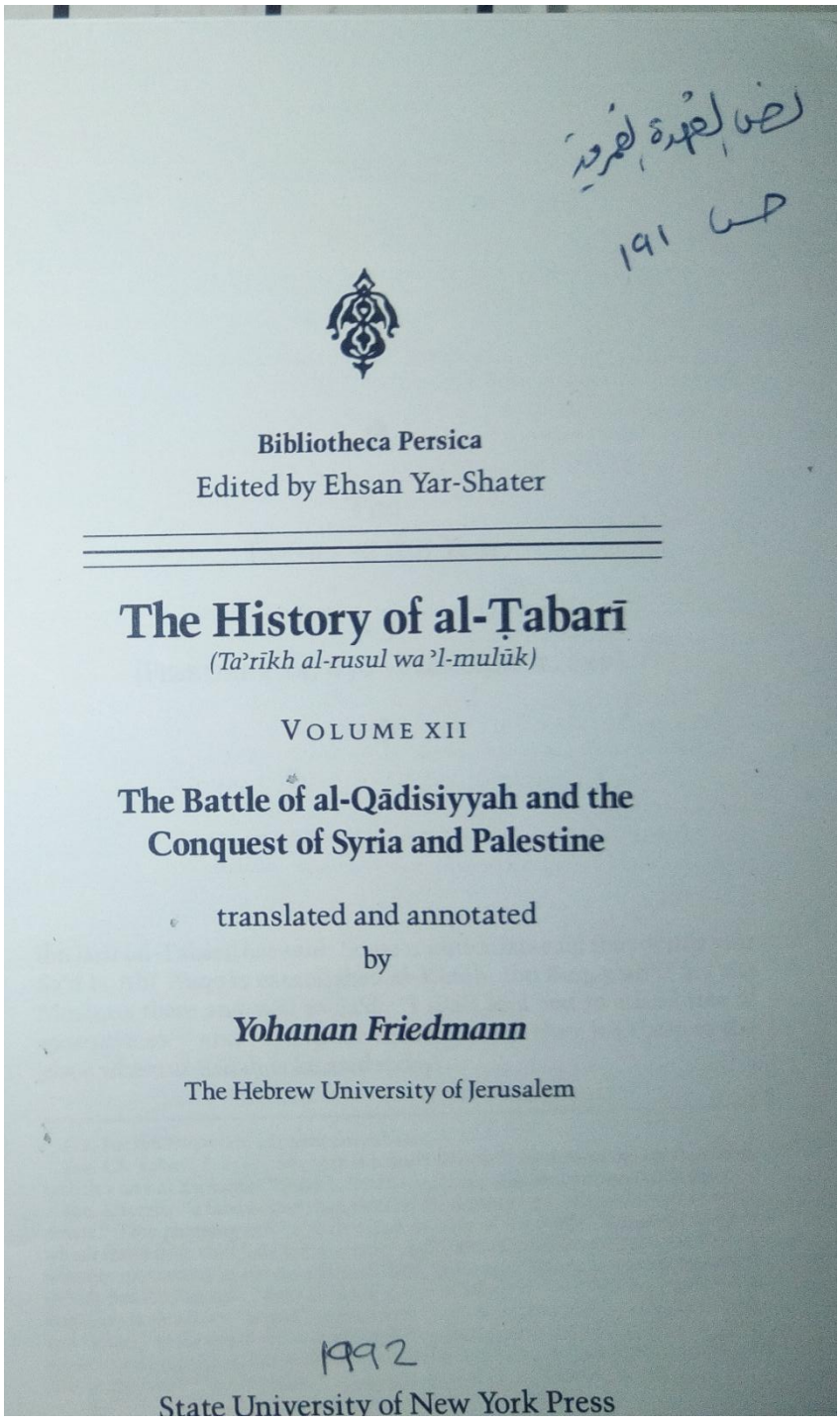


Map 18.1 Syria and Mesopotamia

# Appendix III: Northern Christian Arab Tribes

J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longmann Group Limited, 1979), 174.

# Appendix IV: The History of al-Tabarī



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The History of al-Ṭabarī
(Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk)

VOLUME XII

The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine

translated and annotated
by

*Yohanan Friedmann*

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[The people of Jerusalem] caused distress to ʿAmr and he caused distress to them, but he could not conquer Jerusalem, nor could he conquer al-Ramlah.

While ʿUmar was camping in al-Jābiyah, the Muslims seized their weapons in alarm. ʿUmar asked: "What is it?", and they replied: "Do you not see the horsemen and the swords?" ʿUmar looked and saw a detachment of horsemen brandishing their swords. He said: "They are seeking an assurance of safety. Do not be afraid, but grant it to them." They granted them an assurance of safety and [it became clear that] these were people from Jerusalem. They gave to ʿUmar ...[705] and asked him to give them in writing [the peace terms] for Jerusalem and its region and for al-Ramlah and its region. Palestine was divided into two parts: one part was with the people of Jerusalem, and the other with the people of al-Ramlah. The people of Palestine were [organized in] ten provinces, and Palestine was equal to Syria in its entirety.

The Jew witnessed the conclusion of the peace treaty. ʿUmar asked him about the false Messiah. The Jew said: "He is from the sons of Benjamin. By God, you Arabs will kill him ten odd cubits from the gate of Lydda."

2404] According to Khālid and ʿUbādah: The peace treaty concerning Palestine was concluded by the populace of Jerusalem and al-Ramlah. The reason for this was that Arṭabūn and al-Tadhāriq had left for Egypt when ʿUmar came to al-Jābiyah; they were subsequently killed in one of the summer expeditions.

It was said that the reason for ʿUmar's coming to Syria was the following: Abū ʿUbaydah besieged Jerusalem. Its people asked him to conclude peace with them on the conditions of the Syrian cities and asked that ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb be responsible for the treaty. Abū ʿUbaydah wrote to ʿUmar about it, and ʿUmar made the journey from Medina.

According to ʿAdī b. Sahl: When the Muslims of Syria asked ʿUmar to help them against the people of Palestine, he appointed ʿAlī as his deputy and set out to reinforce them. ʿAlī said: "Where [2405] are going by yourself? You are heading toward a rabid enemy." ʿUmar said: "I hasten to fight the enemy before the death of al-ʿAbbās. If

705. The object of the verb is missing. The Leiden editor's suggestion is that a word like "obedience" (*ṭāʿah*) or "poll tax" (*jizyah*) was omitted.



you lose al-ʿAbbās, evil will untwist you like the ends of a rope." ʿAmr and Shuraḥbīl joined ʿUmar in al-Jābiyah when the peace [with the people of Palestine] was concluded. They witnessed the writing [of the treaty].

According to Khālid and ʿUbādah: ʿUmar made peace with the people of Jerusalem in al-Jābiyah. He wrote for them the peace conditions. He wrote one[706] letter to all the provinces (of Palestine) except to the people of Jerusalem:[707]

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety (*amān*) which the servant of God, ʿUmar, the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and the healthy of the city,[708] and for all the rituals that belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited [by Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross,[709] nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. No Jew will live with them in Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem must pay the poll tax like the people of the [other] cities, and they must expel the Byzantines and the robbers.[710] As for those who will leave the city, their lives and property will be safe until they reach their place of safety; and as for those who remain, they will be safe. They will have to pay the poll tax like the people of Jerusalem. Those of the people of Jerusalem who want to leave with the Byzantines, take their property, and abandon [240

706. In the sense of "identical"; see the phrase introducing the letter to the people of Lydda, p. 2406, below.

707. The people of Jerusalem received a different letter, which follows here.

708. See note 225, above.

709. Busse ("ʿOmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb," 114–15) suggests that this is a reference to the "true cross," taken by the Persians during their invasion of 614 and returned to Jerusalem by Heraclius in 629; cf. Ostrogorsky, *History*, 95, 104; de Goeje (*Mémoire*, 153) and Fattal (*Le statut*, 45) translate as if *ṣalīb* were in the plural, like *ṣulbān* above.

710. Ṭabarī has *luṣūt* (sg. *liṣt*) for the usual Arabic *luṣūṣ* (sg. *liṣṣ*). According to Ibn Manẓūr (*Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. *l-ṣ-t*), this is the form of the word in the dialect of Ṭayyiʾ. For the connection between *liṣṣ* and the Aramaic *liṭṭim*, see Fraenkel, *Fremdwörter*, 284.

their churches and their crosses will be safe[711] until they reach their place of safety. Those villagers (*ahl al-arḍ*) who were in Jerusalem before the killing of so-and-so[712] may remain in the city if they wish, but they must pay the poll tax like the people of Jerusalem. Those who wish may go with the Byzantines, and and those who wish may return to their families. Nothing will be taken from them before their harvest is reaped. If they pay the poll tax according to their obligations, then the contents of this letter are under the covenant of God, are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs, and of the faithful. The persons who attest to it are Khālid b. al-Walīd, ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf,[713] and Muʿāwiyah b. Abī Sufyān. This letter was written and prepared in the year 15/636–37.

The rest of the letters were identical to the letter of Lydda [which follows]:

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is what the servant of God, ʿUmar, the Commander of the Faithful, awarded to the people of Lydda and to all the people of Palestine who are in the same category. He gave them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, their sick and their healthy, and all their rites. Their churches will not be inhabited [by the Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither their churches, nor the land where they stand, nor their rituals, nor their crosses, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted, and none of them will be harmed. The people of Lydda and those of the people of Palestine who are in the same category must pay the poll tax like the people of the Syrian cities. The same conditions, in their entirety, apply to them if they leave (Lydda).

He then sent to them [an army] and divided Palestine between two

711. I have omitted here the words *ʿalā biyaʿihim wa-ṣulubihim*, "their churches and crosses [will be safe]"; this does not make sense in this place. Cf. de Goeje, *Mémoire*, 153 n. 2.

712. The meaning of these words is not clear; cf. de Goeje, *Mémoire*, 153 n. 3. They are missing in the text of the letter included in Suyūṭī, *Itḥāf*, I, 233.

713. See note 4, above.



men; he put ʿAlqamah b. Ḥakīm in charge of one half and stationed him in al-Ramlah, and he put ʿAlqamah b. Mujazziz in charge of the other half and stationed him in Jerusalem. Each of them stayed in his province with the soldiers who were with him.

According to Sālim: [ʿUmar] appointed ʿAlqamah b. Mujazziz governor of Jerusalem and appointed ʿAlqamah b. al-Ḥakīm governor of al-Ramlah. He placed the soldiers who were with ʿAmr (b. al-ʿĀsī) at their disposal. He ordered ʿAmr and Shuraḥbīl to join him in al-Jābiyah. When they reached al-Jābiyah, they found ʿUmar riding. They kissed his knee, and ʿUmar embraced them, holding them to his chest.

According to ʿUbādah and Khālid: Having sent the assurance of safety to the people of Jerusalem and having stationed the army there, ʿUmar set out from al-Jābiyah to Jerusalem. He saw that his horse had injuries on its hooves. So he dismounted, and a jade was brought to him and he rode it. The jade shook him, however, so ʿUmar dismounted, hit the jade's face with his mantle, and said: "May God make ugly him who taught you this!" Then he called for his horse to be brought to him, after he had left him unridden for a few days, and treated his hooves. He mounted his horse and rode until he reached Jerusalem.

According to Abū Ṣafiyyah, an elder from Banū Shaybān: When ʿUmar came to Syria, he was brought a jade and rode it. The jade moved in an unstable manner, inclining from side to side. ʿUmar dismounted, hit the jade's face, and said: "May God not teach him who taught you this sort of pride!" He had not ridden a jade before that or after that.

Jerusalem and its entire region were conquered by ʿUmar, except for Ajnādayn, which was conquered by ʿAmr (b. al-ʿĀṣi), and Caesarea, which was conquered by Muʿāwiyah (b. Abī Sufyān).

According to Abū ʿUthmān and Abū Ḥārithah: Jerusalem and its region were conquered in the month of Rabīʿ al-Ākhir of the year 16/May 637.

According to Abū Maryam, the client of Salāmah, who said: I witnessed the conquest of Jerusalem with ʿUmar: He set out from al-Jābiyah, leaving it behind until he came to Jerusalem. He then went on and entered the mosque.[714] Then he went on toward the *miḥrāb*

714. *Al-masjid* refers in this context to the Temple Mount, in keeping with the

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